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THE MASKED BAND: or, THE MAN WITHOUT A NAME.

BY GEORGE L. AIKEN.



"THERE IS BUT ONE HOPE FOR YOU—CONSENT TO SIGN THAT DOCUMENT!"

The Masked Band;

or,
THE MAN WITHOUT A NAME.

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CHAPTER I.

NEW YORK, 1873.

Two girls sat conversing together in the humble home which they had formed in one of those great barracks of houses in New York city which are let out in apartments.

That the subject of their conversation was not a pleasant one, their looks plainly evinced.

These were two working-girls of the great metropolis. One, the larger and elder, was known as Kate Vehslage; the other, Henrietta Ward, though she was universally addressed by the abbreviation of Etta.

"Did you ever wish you were a man?" said Kate, pursuing the conversation.

Etta looked at her in a surprised manner, while a faint smile came to her sad, wan face.

"No, I cannot say that I ever did," she replied.

"Well, I have, and I do!" continued Kate, energetically. "I might get something to do then. I might saw wood, or shovel coal, or draw a handcart, or shake carpets, or something of that sort."

Etta shook her head.

"I doubt if you could find occupation even if you were a man," she made answer. "We are not the only sufferers in the city."

"Well, we are fortunate in one thing," cried Kate.

Again a look of surprise came over Etta's pale features.

"In what?" she asked.

"We didn't have any money in the savings banks, and there's been an awful run on them," answered Kate, with a laugh, but there was more of bitterness than mirth in it.

"It seems very wrong to me."

Kate laughed again, in her bitter fashion.

"Is anything right nowadays?" she demanded.

"Is there any chance for honest poor people in this great city? Does anybody give us a chance to live?

Look how we were swindled on that sewing-machine. Didn't we scrape together ten dollars to pay down, and weren't we to have it for five dollars a month, with plenty of high-priced work that would pay for it twice over in a year's time? And didn't we keep it three months, without any high-priced work—I making shirts on it, and you finishing them?" continued Kate, volubly. "And because we couldn't pay the next month's rent, didn't the man take away our machine, and didn't we lose all we had paid on it?"

Etta sighed, drearily.

"Yes, dear—it was very hard!" she replied.

"Hard? it was rascally! It was downright robbery, and I told the man so, but he only laughed at me. I was that mad I could have scratched his eyes out. I had often wondered how any one could commit a murder, but I don't now. I could have killed that man without compunction."

Kate set her strong, white teeth firmly together, and Etta shivered.

"Don't talk that way, Kate—I don't like to hear you," she cried.

Kate laughed.

"Bah! don't mind me, Etta," she rejoined. "You know my bark is worse than my bite. You grow despondent, that's your nature, but these things make me mad—that's mine."

Etta's fair head drooped, wearily.

"I don't see what we are going to do," she murmured.

"And I don't, either, and that's what disturbs the natural serenity of my disposition," responded Kate, grimly. "We were getting along splendidly until this panic came, and now we are at a complete standstill. Two weeks are gone out of the month, and old Glackmeyer will not wait on us much longer. He'll put our things out on the sidewalk, and then what will we do, and where will we go?"

Etta's head drooped still lower.

"I'm sure I don't know," she murmured.

"This isn't very splendid, but still it is a home," continued Kate, glancing around her; "but we have been very comfortable here."

"We have, indeed," answered Etta, with a sigh; "and I should be loth to leave it."

She also raised her eyes to look at their surroundings. They were not splendid, as Kate had said, but still an air of comfort pervaded the apartment in which they sat.

They occupied an apartment, as they are called, in a tenement-house on Chrystie street, this apartment consisting of two rooms, one a living-room, combining the offices of parlor and kitchen, and the other a bedroom. This was lighted from the main or larger room, though there was a window of glazed glass looking out upon the hall; but as these rooms were in the third story of the house and the hall was dark, this window was only serviceable as a means of ventilation when the weather was warm.

There were three similar apartments on the floor; that made four in all, two back and two front. The girls' room was the right-hand back one. It was not so pleasant as one of the front ones, as its two windows only commanded a view of the yard and the backs of the adjoining houses, whereas the windows of the others looked down upon the busy street, with its ever-moving human beings, animals and vehicles; but the rent of the back ones was cheaper, and Kate and Etta were obliged to practice a close economy.

This house, like a great many in New York, particularly in the Tenth ward, was a perfect hive of humanity. The laboring poor live in close quarters, but they live upon such terms of amity with their strange neighbors as their betters might copy to advantage.

The furnishing of such an apartment as I have described does not require much money; it can be made comfortable at a little outlay. A cheap stove is the first requisite, which is generally obtained second-hand from a dealer in such articles; a common bureau, a table, a few chairs, dishes, and cooking utensils.

The girls' room was furnished rather better than is ordinary, for they had a carpet, that looked neat and clean, plain shades to the windows, and two tables, half a dozen chairs, two of them being rockers, and through the open door of the bedroom could be seen a washstand, bowl and pitcher, and a white spread upon the bed.

Both of the girls, despite their poverty, were neatly dressed, and their humble home had a tidy appearance altogether.

There was a striking contrast between them, both in size and looks. Kate Vehslage was full a head taller than her companion, and much stouter, with dark-brown hair, gray eyes, and a dark complexion. Her features were bold, but by no means handsome, though a smart look prevented them from being called homely. Henrietta, on the contrary, was a little beauty, with a clear complexion—a trifle too pale now—large blue eyes, and luxuriant, light hair. She looked altogether too delicate for the hard lot that had become her life's position, and but for the assistance and advice of her stronger companion she would before this have succumbed to its hardships; but even that help seemed about to fail her now.

Both girls had fallen into a gloomy reverie. Kate was the first to arouse herself from it. She studied Etta's face intently for a few moments, and then suddenly exclaimed:

"I only wish I had your face, Etta! I'd make something out of it."

Etta raised her head in surprise.

"Would you?" she answered; and then added, with a sigh: "Perhaps you might, but it's more than I can. But I am not so smart as you are."

"No, but you are beautiful!"

A faint blush suffused Etta's cheeks, and enhanced her beauty, showing that a little color was needed to make the charm of her face complete.

"Do you think so?" she murmured.

"Yes, and so do you. Oh, don't try to look so innocent; you know it as well as I do. Such a face as yours ought to make the fortune of its wearer."

Etta smiled.

"Well, Kate, if it makes mine, you shall share it with me," she replied, "for you are the best friend I ever had—indeed, you are the only friend I have now. Ah, me! life looks so dreary to me, and I am so young!"

"Keep up your courage; it's always darkest before day, and, who knows? better luck may be in store for us yet. Many a rich man would be glad to have so pretty a wife as you will make. But you're so shy, you never give the men the least encouragement."

Etta blushed again.

"I would not do anything unmaidenly," she replied. "And how can I become any man's wife with this terrible mystery hanging over me?"

Kate's face evinced an eager curiosity.

"Yes, you have a secret that you will not tell even to me," she cried, somewhat reproachfully. "Though we have worked together for more than two years, and been good friends all that time, yet you have been afraid to trust me."

Etta looked troubled.

"It was not because I was afraid to trust you, Kate," she answered; "but my past life is so like a distempered dream that I could not bear to speak of it. I have sometimes thought that a terrible curse hangs over my family."

"A curse? Nonsense! I don't believe that. You are too good to have a curse hanging over your life."

Etta shivered.

"I don't know," she rejoined, dreamily. "My aunt always impressed that on my mind."

"You were brought up by an aunt, then?"

"Yes, Mrs. Ward—I and Raymond."

"Raymond?"

"My brother."

Kate looked surprised.

"You have a brother?" she cried.

"I had; but I do not know now whether he is alive or dead."

"You don't?"

"No; he ran away from us when he was twelve years old, and he was never heard of afterward."

"That's strange!"

"He did not like Mrs. Ward," answered Etta, simply.

"Oh! I see. But how came you to be brought up by this aunt? Where were your parents—dead?"

"I don't know—that is the mystery of my life. My aunt, a stern, silent woman, would tell me, when I asked about them, that my mother was dead, and that if my father was not, he ought to be, for he deserved to be burnt alive."

"My! she did not have a very good opinion of your father."

"No; and she and Raymond—for he was more pressing in his inquiries—quarreled about him, for he would not believe his father was a bad man; he remembered him, though I could not. One day he said to me, 'Sis, I am going to find father, and when I find him, we'll come back for you.' Then he went away."

"Ah! he was a brave boy! Was he much older than you?"

"Two years, I believe."

"And you never heard of him from that day?"

"Never; I might have done so, perhaps, but shortly after he went away my aunt died, and I was taken in charge by a kind lady. My memory is very indistinct about these events, but from what I can remember it appears that my aunt was an utter stranger in the place where we had been living, and had formed no acquaintance with her neighbors. She was, as I have said, a stern, silent woman, and we lived very retired in a little cottage, with a large garden, in the outskirts of the town."

"Do you remember the name of the town?"

"Oh, yes; it was Erie, on the lake of that name."

"Law! I never heard of that place. It must be far from here."

"It is."

"Out West?"

"Yes; toward the West, but not very far West, as it is in Pennsylvania."

"Do you think you were born out that way?"

"I do not know; but I certainly was not born in that town, for nobody knew anything about me there. They did not know where my aunt came from or what her means were. I heard them say so at the funeral; and they also said that she must

have received money from somewhere, as her rent and little household accounts were paid regularly, and she had kept a house-girl, a German girl, who spoke but little of our language. I used to laugh at her odd words, but she was very kind to me. My aunt was known as Mrs. Ward—and I always called myself Henrietta Ward when people asked my name; but they appeared to think that was not our right name."

This narration surprised Kate more and more as Etta proceeded with it.

"Not your right name?" she cried. "Why should they think that?"

"Because in searching about the house to see what was left for me, they discovered that her linen was all marked with the letter A."

"The letter A! What did that stand for?"

"I do not know; but it could not have stood for Ward."

"Of course not; that would be W. Were your clothes marked the same?"

"No; the most of them were not marked at all; but they found some that I had outgrown, among my aunt's clothes, and these were marked H. B."

"H. B.! Well, well, here's another puzzle; and you have no idea what they stood for, I suppose?"

"H. stands for Henrietta undoubtedly, but what the B. was placed for I have no means of knowing."

"But I know!" cried Kate, vivaciously.

"You do?"

"Yes, of course; H. B. are the first letters of your right name?"

Etta smiled.

"It is very probable," she replied. "But what is that name?"

Kate laughed and shook her head, crying:

"Ah! you've got me there."

Etta sighed in her pensive manner.

"I fear I shall never know that now," she said.

"I believe that I am the last survivor of my family, and that some terrible evil befell it in my infancy. I think that both my father and mother died violent deaths—there must have been some dread tragedy that shortened their lives, I know by my aunt's manner of speaking of them—some terrible disgrace that led her to change her name and mine, and made her adopt our obscure manner of living. This terrible secret also shortened her days, for I think brooding over it broke her heart. She died very suddenly, and they said it was heart-disease that killed her. I found her sitting in her easy-chair, pale and rigid, with her sewing in her lap. Something in her attitude appeared strange to me, and sent a chill through my blood as I gazed upon her. I thought something had gone wrong with her, and called the house-girl. When she came, she told me my aunt was dead. It was dreadful! It was many weeks before I could drive away the image of that rigid face, and staring, glassy eyes. Thus she died, and carried with her to her grave the dread secret she had so carefully guarded while she lived."

"How strange! And you may never be able to find out who you really are, or what your true name should be."

Etta shook her head sadly.

"I have no hope of it," she answered. "For many years I have considered this mystery of the past impenetrable, and have reconciled myself to pass through life with the only name I have ever known. Why will not Henrietta Ward answer my purpose as well as any other name? I am sure it is not a bad name."

"By no means. But then you'll change it one of these days."

"Change it?" rejoined Etta, surprisedly.

"To be sure, when that rich husband comes along."

"Nonsense!"

Kate shook her head oracularly.

"There's no nonsense about it, as you will see one of these days," she replied. "I've always been counting on that from the day that you and I commenced to live together; and I've kept a sharp eye over the young men who have been ogling us when we have been in the street. I've been a perfect dragon over you, my dear, though you never suspected it; but I'm New York born, and can't be humbugged—and they know it. There's a fortune in your face, as I told you, and I'm going to help you get it. Though I shouldn't be surprised if there was lots of money waiting for you if it was only known where you were to be found."

Etta shook her head doubtfully.

"I can scarcely think that," she answered. "My aunt lived very frugally, and there was little money left in the house when she died."

"How do you know she was your aunt? She might have been hired by somebody to take care of you after you were stolen away from your home."

"There were many in the town thought the same as you do," answered Etta, reflectively.

"There!" cried Kate; as if this was a confirmation of her surmise.

"But I do not," continued Etta, positively. "I am

get work enough to do—but there, it's no use worrying! Let's go out and take a walk. We may find something to do."

CHAPTER II.

THE SECRET ORDER.

It was a strange apartment, and, in the dim light that the lamps afforded, it was impossible for the unpracticed eye to judge of its dimensions or extent. Whichever way the eye turned the apartment appeared to recede far away, with those strange globes covering the lamps, suspended in brackets to the wall. Strange globes, indeed! for each one bore the semblance of a ghastly, grinning human skull, the light gleaming through the eyeless sockets and the bony jaws. Before, right, and left, these skulls were seen until they were lost in a dim distance. It appeared as if this apartment extended to an illimitable distance, and in that distance the skulls shed a feeble light through the eyeholes.

The effect upon a stranger was startling, and thrilled his heart with a supernatural awe. Coming through the black drapery, that masked the entrance door, and which fell behind him as if darkly cutting off all return to the bright world without, it appeared as if he had penetrated into a judgment hall, or rather a series of halls, such as might have served the terrible Inquisition in the olden time.

The walls were black and somber between the large doors, or what appeared to be such, leading to the other apartments, and gave a gloomy look to the place, to which the ghastly skulls greatly added.

In the center of the main apartment was a kind of altar, or tribunal, covered with black. A hanging of black velvet was suspended in front of it, having a skull in its center, and crossbones in each corner, embroidered with silver threads. At each corner of the altar was a high silver lamp, whose globe was a skull, similar to those that hung from the wall.

This altar appeared in every one of the halls, and revealed the device by which this seeming number of rooms was obtained. Large mirrors had been fastened against the wall, reaching from the floor nearly to the ceiling, and arch-shaped at the top. These were seeming doors that appeared to lead to other rooms, and thus their number was multiplied indefinitely.

This cunning device had a bewildering effect upon the imagination, and only a long familiarity with the room enabled one to detect the means by which this startling and supernatural effect was gained. The dim light always maintained in the room aided in the deception.

This gloomy apartment was occupied by figures as gloomy as itself; figures with human faces, clad in long, flowing robes of black. In this again the cruel Inquisition had been copied; these figures wore a dress similar to the familiars, as the officers of that dread institution were called, with this singular exception: the familiars wore over their heads and faces a hood, with holes for the eyes, thus masking their features completely; but these figures, in every instance, showed the face. The hood was opened between the chin and crown of the head, and every feature was plainly visible.

But they were strange faces, these that were so freely exposed. They were all the faces of young men, comely in feature, faultless in contour, with intensely-black eyebrows, and a heavy mustache and imperial of the same inky hue.

One of these dark-robed figures sat behind the altar. At the two corners were two others, holding each a bright-bladed sword in his right hand. At the drapery that masked the entrance was another figure holding a drawn sword in his hand.

Between the door and the altar, clustered in a group, were six more of the black-robed figures. This was all—though these ten figures were multiplied into hundreds by the deceiving mirrors.

The secret order was in session, and important business was about to be transacted. There was a hush of expectancy among the figures.

Then the judge, or chief, or whatever title he bore, demanded, in a clear, musical voice:

"Is the prisoner secured?"

"He is," replied one of those who stood by the altar, with a sword in hand.

"Bring him before me that I may pass judgment upon him."

The sword-bearer saluted with his weapon, in a peculiar fashion, and then went to the door. Two of the others joined him, and the three disappeared behind the drapery.

After a short pause, the sentinel flourished his sword and then stood on guard with the point extended.

"Who comes here?" he cried, his voice sounding hollow and sepulchral.

"A culprit!" was answered back, from behind the drapery.

"What does he come to face?"

"Death!"

"What does he leave behind?"

"Hope!"

"Let him enter."

The drapery was thrust aside and the three black-cloaked figures brought a man into the room, and led him up to the tribunal—a tall man, of sinewy proportions, with his arms tied behind him, a bandage fastened over his eyes, and a gag thrust into his mouth.

"Remove the bandage and the gag," said the chief. "And, swords, guard him carefully—he is dangerous."

The moment the gag was taken from his mouth the man burst into a laugh—a laugh clear and resonant, that sounded strangely out of place in that gloomy apartment. Then the bandage was taken from his eyes, and he looked curiously about him. If they had expected him to be appalled by his surroundings, they must have been disappointed, for his face exhibited only a laughing scorn.

He was a fine specimen of a man, fully six feet in height, well-proportioned, and of dignified bearing. His head was large, his forehead prominent and massive as with the weight of thought, his hair long and dark-brown, but strangely shot with threads of silver; he had a long straight nose, a square chin, strongly marked with decision of character, and a large, laughing blue eye. His face beamed with a benevolent look, mingled with a touch of humor; and it was cleanly shaven, no beard being allowed to grow upon it. Take him altogether, he was a

man whose appearance could not fail to attract attention in any sphere of life.

The two figures that held the swords stood at either side of him and pointed their weapons at him in a menacing manner.

If he was a dangerous man, as their chief had said, his manner then gave no indication of it. He merely glanced at the gleaming blades, saying:

"What mummery is this?"

"Silence!" cried the chief, sternly. "You are here to answer questions, not to ask them."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the captive. "Have I fallen into the hands of masked robbers? Well, take the contents of my pockets, and let me go."

"We are not common robbers," rejoined the chief.

"No, you are uncommon robbers, I can see that at a glance, ha! ha! ha!"

But with all his apparent carelessness and unconcern his eyes took in his surroundings keenly, and one thing surprised him; the faces of all these cloaked figures bore a strange resemblance to each other; when they spoke their lips did not move, and every feature remained impassive; not a muscle twitched, not a sign of emotion was exhibited; they were only blank visages lit up with gleaming eyes.

Gradually a vacant look came over the captive's face, as if he had caught the expression from theirs, or else that his mind was led away by some bewildering thought. The voice of the chief appeared to perplex him. It seemed like a voice of the past faintly echoing through his brain. But he was not allowed much time to indulge in these reflections.

"What is your name?" demanded the chief.

The captive started, and made a movement as if he would have put a hand in his pocket, probably for his card-case, if his arms had been at liberty, and then glanced over his shoulder ruefully.

"Well, it doesn't matter," he answered—"I don't think I've got a card with me—I generally have one—because my memory is bad. Excuse me if I don't give you a card—you see I can't very well, even if I had one. Ha! ha! ha! ha!"

His laugh rung out jovially. If those who surrounded him were surprised at his mirth their faces did not show it; they all maintained their impassiveness.

"Do not trifling with us!" the chief exclaimed, in tones that clearly revealed his irritation. "You will do our pleasure, or—"

"What?" inquired the captive, as the chief paused in a menacing manner.

"You will die!"

"You will die!" echoed the order, in a sepulchral chorus.

"Ah, well, I expect to some time," was the composed reply.

"You will die to-night!" thundered the chief.

And the order again echoed:

"You will die to-night!"

The captive glanced disdainfully at the black figures by which he was surrounded.

"Then there will be plenty of mutes at my funeral, ha! ha! ha!" he rejoined.

An oath broke fiercely from the lips of the chief. The bearing of his captive, evidently, surprised and enraged him.

"You will not laugh so loud presently!" he cried. "Be wise, and do not provoke us. Once more, tell me your name!"

"Smith!" answered the captive, after a moment's reflection.

"It is not," cried the chief, sternly.

"Jones, then."

"It is not."

"Brown—how do you like that?"

"Your name?"

"Robinson, not Crusoe, but another man."

"You will not tell it me?"

"How unreasonable you are! I have given you four names and you are not satisfied with either."

"Your obstinacy will not serve you. I know your name."

"You do! Then why did you ask me?"

The chief did not condescend to reply to this question.

"Nightshade, advance!" he cried. "Hold the deed before this man's eyes and let him read it."

One of the figures took a folded document from beneath his cloak, opened it, and exhibited its contents to the captive, who gazed upon it unmovedly, merely saying, "Ah!" as if something had been made plain to him.

"Do you understand its purport?" continued the chief.

"It appears to be a deed—a conveyance of a certain piece of property."

"You will sign it."

"I?"

"You will sign it, or you will never see another sun rise."

"Oh! signing it is easy enough—that is if my hands were free—but what good would that do you? I can not deed away another person's property."

"Sign the deed, and I'll take the risk of any other person."

"Ha! ha! ha! how obliging you are. Well, which name shall I sign—Smith, Jones, Brown or Robinson?"

"You will sign your true name to it."

"What is that?"

This question seemed to surprise the chief, and a murmur arose from the group of black cloaks, but not a muscle moved in their impassive features.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have forgotten your name?" demanded the chief, impatiently.

"I have told you my name," insisted the captive. "If you don't believe me, open my coat here to the left, and you will find a card there, I think. I generally carry one there to refresh my memory when I get bothered—as I often do."

The benevolent features of the captive now wore a very vacant look, but those who surrounded him could not tell whether it was natural to him or merely assumed for the moment.

But the search beneath his coat, that he had suggested, was made and a card discovered as he had said. A card with a printed name upon it, pinned to the lining of his coat.

The little figure of the black cloaks glanced at it, and then gave it to his chief, who read the inscription aloud:

"PETER SHAW, Broker."

This card perplexed him.

"What should this mean?" he muttered. "Is that the name you are known by now?" he asked.

The captive smiled serenely.

"That's it—now you've got it—Peter Shaw—that's me," he answered. "Peter Shaw, broker, and agent for the great oil wells of French Creek. Orders taken for petroleum in barrel or bulk."

The chief and the small figure consulted in whispers together, and the small figure appeared to be urging some measure upon the chief which he had some reluctance to adopt.

"Do you think this is a mania with him, or merely affected?" said the chief.

"It appears to me to be affected," was the answer. "Put him to the severest test. Make him sign this document, or—"

The rest of the sentence was whispered in the ear of the chief.

"I will!" was the stern rejoinder. "Swords, prepare. Culprit, listen to the voice of doom. Death surrounds you upon every side—no avenue of escape is open to you—no cry that you can utter can penetrate these walls of gloom to the busy world without. Here there is no hope of succor, no rescue possible. You stand in the presence of a dread tribunal against which the law itself is powerless. Judgment has been pronounced against you, for the red crime of the past."

The captive started, while a strange tremor pervaded his stalwart frame, and he cast a curious, searching glance at the face of the chief; but those features were inscrutable and baffled all penetration.

"Crime—crime!" murmured the captive, dreamily. "I am not the man—he was lost—on that fearful night. I told you my name—on the card, you've got it—Shaw—Peter Shaw, broker."

"Is his brain affected, think you?" the chief inquired, in a low tone of the small figure, whom he had designated as "Nightshade," and who appeared to be his adviser in all matters of moment.

"Let the ordeal of trial determine that," replied Nightshade. "The truth will appear as the doom proceeds."

"Let the doom proceed!" exclaimed the order, in sepulchral tones.

"Swords, prepare!" cried the chief again. "Grasp firmly your glittering blades of vengeance, Aconite and Henbane! Culprit, look on that gleaming steel! In another moment your life's blood will dim its brightness. There is but one hope for you. Consent to sign that document!"

CHAPTER III.

A FEARFUL DOOM.

A SILENCE like that of death pervaded the gloomy judgment hall of the secret order, and its members held their breath in a painful suspense listening for the culprit's reply to their chief.

None there thought he would have the temerity to refuse, therefore their surprise was great when he burst into a laugh—a laugh which appeared to mock both death and them.

The swords glittered menacingly at his breast, only waiting for the order of the chief to pierce it and seek the life-current that flowed within.

"Why do you laugh?" demanded the chief, harshly.

"To think that you should expect me to sign a paper with my hands tied behind me," was the reply.

"Unloose his bonds," said the chief.

"One moment!" interposed Nightshade, and he whispered rapidly to the chief.

"Ha! do you think he would?" questioned the dark-robed captain.

"Yes; there's mischief in his eye—I can read it there. He might kill you before we could overpower him," whispered Nightshade.

The chief appeared impressed by these words.

"True," he muttered, "and I know, by past experience, what strength lies in those sinewy arms. It were best to be cautious with him."

Nightshade uttered a dry chuckle, and it sounded strangely elfish.

"I'm always cautious," he replied. "Never permit any one to catch me napping. Vigilance is the safeguard of our order. Unbind his right arm sufficiently to enable him to sign his name, and no more. Let me attend to it. I'll fix him so he can't do any mischief."

"Do so."

Nightshade advanced to the captive and unloosened his bonds in such a manner that his right arm was free to the elbow; but from the elbow up it remained firmly trussed against his side. In this posture it was impossible for him to use it in an aggressive action.

This done, Nightshade brought forward a small round table, which was covered with a black cloth, with a skull in the center and cross-bones in the corners, embroidered with silver threads in the same fashion as the altar-cloth.

On this table was a black inkstand and several black pens in ebony handles.

Having placed the table before the captive, Nightshade spread the document out upon it, took one of the pens and offered it to him, and he received it mechanically.

All thought that the paper would now be signed. No captive ever brought within these gloomy precincts but had yielded to the dread terrors by which he had been surrounded.

"Astoresh and Baal, you will witness it," said the chief.

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed the captive. "Astoresh and Baal! ho, ho, ho!—and where's Lucifer, and Beelzebub, and the rest of the Satanic tribe? I, this Hades, and am I already out of the world? Have I crossed the Styx with old Charon and did not know it?"</p

trying to impress the writing upon his memory. "You write a good hand," he added.

"Tolerable. Here is the place—on this line—sign." But the captive was in no hurry to do so.

"Sign!" cried the chief, impatiently. The captive looked at him reflectively.

"I would like to see your face," he said.

"You do see it."

The captive shook his head doubtfully.

"It is a false face you show me, not your own," he rejoined. "But the voice, I shall remember that—and when we meet again—"

"Sign that deed!" interrupted the chief, fiercely.

"It is close upon the stroke of twelve. If the midnight hour sounds with that paper unsigned, you will die."

"Sign!" uttered the order, in a deep chorus.

"What name?" demanded the captive, absently.

"Your own!"

"I have forgotten it."

There was a pause, and the captive held the pen listlessly between his thumb and forefinger, showing no disposition to use it in the manner desired.

"Let me refresh your memory," said Nightshade, officially. "You see how the deed begins. You see the name written there—write that name here, by the seals."

A clock at the end of the room gave a whizzing sound, in contrast with the monotonous ticking it had been making.

"The clock is about to strike," cried the chief. "Twelve seconds are all that are left you now—all that separates you from eternity if you refuse to do my bidding. Sign."

"I have no name to sign," answered the captive, abstractedly.

"Sign—or you die!"

The captive burst into a laugh.

"I shall die all the same whether I sign or not," he replied.

The clock began to strike—the order counted the strokes lugubriously in a dismal chorus. But this last effort to dismay the captive failed like all the rest.

At the last stroke he dropped the pen from his hand.

"He will not sign!" cried the chief, angrily. "Let him die!"

"Let him die!" chorused the order.

The swords were again raised menacingly.

"Hold!" cried Nightshade. "We must not kill him here."

"Why not?" demanded the chief.

Nightshade advanced to the chief and conferred privately with him for a few moments. The chief's mind was swayed by his advice.

"You are right," he said. "We can thus make his death appear an accident. Open the scuttle and take him up to the roof—but gag him again to prevent him from making any outcry."

The gag was again thrust into the captive's mouth. He did not attempt any resistance; perhaps he reflected that it would be folly to attempt any against the odds by which he was surrounded, and the advantage which had been gained over him.

A step-ladder was brought forth from a closet whose door was concealed by the somber hanging of the wall, and placed beneath a scuttle-door that opened upon the roof.

Nightshade ascended this ladder nimbly, and opened the scuttle, and took a survey of the roof.

"A dark night," he said, withdrawing his head, and looking down upon his confederates. "No moon, and only a few stars shining. Come now, lead him up."

Nightshade went through the scuttle to the roof. The chief followed him, and two of the order led the captive up the ladder, and out upon the roof. The others followed.

In a strange, weird group they gathered around the captive upon the roof. The dark shades of night closed about them gloomily. A few pale stars glittered coldly down from the somber sky above their heads. The night-breeze wailed plaintively, sounding like the sweep of the death-angel's wing.

"Do you know what we intend to do to you now?" asked the chief, in a stern whisper.

The cruel gag prevented the captive from replying; but the chief did not expect an answer, for he continued:

"We intend to hurl you from this roof-top to the pavement below. In such a fall you will be dashed to pieces. But I would be spared the commission of such a deed. There is still a chance for your life. Sign the document, and you shall be spared. I swear it by all I hold sacred. Do you consent? Shake your head affirmatively if you do."

The captive's head was shaken, but most decidedly in the negative.

"Ha! you still are obstinate? you will force me to destroy you?"

The captive made no sign to this.

"Then perish!" cried the chief, angrily.

"Stay! I have thought of something else," interposed the crafty Nightshade. "Put him down one of the chimneys, and let him roast."

"Good! it shall be done," answered the chief.

Nightshade glided to his elbow, and whispered something in his ear.

"Perhaps he may," returned the chief, guardedly; "but if he continues obstinate, I will not spare him."

"Take him to the last chimney in the block," suggested Nightshade. "Precaution is never idle, and if the body should chance to be found, it were as well not to have it too near home."

"There is no fear of that; such a descent is sure to dash his brains out; but still, as you say, it may not be amiss to take all precaution. Lead him along."

They conducted their captive across the roofs; helping him over the boundaries that marked the different houses, but they did not go to the extreme house in the block, as Nightshade was attracted by a chimney whose top had been blown off by some strong gale, and the damage left unrepaired.

"The very thing!" he said. "Stop here."

The chief approached the broken chimney, and looked down its gaping mouth.

"Chance favors us," he said. "We have no obstruction to remove. Culprit, for the last time, I offer you a hope of life. Will you sign the deed?"

Nightshade produced the paper, a portable inkstand, and pen, from beneath his cloak.

"I have the requisite articles with me," he said, "as I thought you might change your mind. I have found that the sure prospect of death has a wonderful effect upon some people's minds."

"Will you sign?" repeated the chief. "It is not necessary that you should do so here—for I would have the deed properly signed and attested. I know you; what you say you will do is as good as performed. Your word is enough; consent, and you shall be taken back to our council-chamber, and, when the deed is executed, at once restored to liberty. Will you sign?"

The captive shook his head negatively.

The chief was furious.

"You prefer to die?" he hissed.

The captive gave an affirmative nod.

"Then die you shall! Thrust him down, head foremost, into the chimney."

The captive suddenly lowered his head and plunged forward violently at the chief, striking him full in the chest and hurling him senseless to the roof.

Then he saluted Nightshade with a kick that doubled up his small figure into a black ball, and rolled him away, the deed, inkstand and pen flying in different directions.

The other members of the order precipitated themselves upon the captive, and a desperate struggle ensued. Had his strong arms been free he would have made it a sad night's work for them, but bound as he was, they had him at a disadvantage; yet he struggled manfully, desperately.

In the struggle the gag became loosened and fell from his mouth.

"Murder!" he cried, in a voice that sounded resonantly upon the night air.

He was not suffered to repeat that cry. A blow from a "life-preserver," which one of the order drew from beneath his cloak, struck him down.

A feeble moan escaped his lips, and then his tall form lay motionless.

The order crouched down guiltily upon the roof, their black cloaks so muffling them as to give them the appearance of having vanished.

They crouched down, and listened.

Presently a sound rose up from the street below—the sound of a policeman's club striking against the curbstone. It came faintly up to them, and they breathed more freely when they heard it, for it signaled, "All's well."

The policeman had not heard the cry, or if he had, had mistaken its import, thinking it the shout of some belated reveler.

Nightshade came creeping along the roof toward the prostrate form of the captive, breathing hard and groaning as he came.

"Is he done for?" he whispered.

"I think so. I was obliged to strike him with my life-preserver—there was no help for it," answered Aconite, in guarded tones.

"No; he nearly did for me. Phew! what a kick he gave me! I never expected to get the breath back into my body. Look to the chief. See how still he lies. I hope he hasn't killed him. Ah, we never had so tough a subject in our hands before."

Two of the order hastened to the assistance of their fallen chief, and raised him to a sitting posture.

"He is not dead; I can feel his heart beat," said Aconite.

"Put a few drops of brandy down his throat, if you have your flask with you—have you?"

"Yes."

The brandy was administered, and a sigh burst from the lips of the chief. Nightshade knelt beside him and gave him another swallow of the brandy.

"To have had him killed would have spoiled all," he muttered. "We played for a million to-night," he glanced at the captive's motionless form, "and I think we've won—I think we've won!"

The chief's scattered senses began to come back to him. He passed his hand over his forehead, and then stared wildly before him.

But his fall had caused a strange change in his features; the white face that looked so bewildered was not the face that the captive had gazed upon—it had lost its immobility, its impassiveness, and now showed traces of human emotion.

"What has happened?" he asked, feebly. "Ah—yes—I remember. Where is he—has he escaped?" he added, tremulously.

"No; yonder he lies—dead, I think; for Aconite struck him down with his life-preserver."

The chief laughed, gaspingly, but with malignant joy.

"Well done!" he said; the tones of his voice sounding huskily, as if it cost him an effort to speak. "Put him down the chimney—as well bury him there as anywhere else. Curse him! he has driven my ribs in upon my heart, so that every breath costs me a pang."

"Yes, he dashed at you like an infuriated bull!"

"Help me up, Nightshade—I don't think I can stand alone—let me see the last of him."

The chief was lifted up, and managed to stand with Nightshade's assistance.

"Cut away his bonds," said Nightshade. "There is no need of them now. Besides, if his body should be found it will look more like an accident."

One of the order cut the cords that fastened the captive's arms. Then they lifted him up to the chimney.

"He's not dead!" cried Aconite; "he moves and breathes."

"Then finish him!" rejoined the chief, savagely.

"Down with him!"

The form of the captive disappeared down the chimney.

CHAPTER IV.

FRENCH CREEK, 1858.

THE Alleghany river intersects Venango county, Pennsylvania, and in this county one of its principal affluents was a sluggish stream which at this time—'58—bore the name of French Creek.

The road from Meadville to Franklin followed the course of the creek.

A few houses were built in picturesque situations upon the bank of the creek, their fronts facing the road; and it is with one of them that we have now to do, as the building, and the adjoining land, have an important place in our story.

This one was a commodious frame house, built in the usual style of country architecture.

Jane Bartyne was alone in the house, and, despite

her efforts to banish it, a feeling of loneliness had taken possession of her mind. The coachman, Black Jake, had gone with her two children, a boy and a girl of the respective ages of five and three, to visit her sister, who lived at Franklin, near the mouth of the creek, which ran through her husband's fine estate, and upon whose bank their own house was situated. They had gone in the family carriage, and, as it was quite a long drive, they did not purpose returning until the following day. This had left her alone with the colored housekeeper, old Caroline, Jake's mother; but after supper a messenger had come to the house and informed Caroline that her married daughter, who lived some three miles away, had been taken suddenly ill and was not expected to live until morning.

In such an emergency Mrs. Bartyne could not detain Caroline, and she departed in all haste for her daughter's home. A strange restlessness seized upon Mrs. Bartyne when old Caroline was gone; a foreboding of evil oppressed her mind. Some coming danger appeared to cast a lengthening shadow over her.

She tried to smile at these gloomy fancies and drive them from her thoughts. What had she to fear? she asked herself. Her husband would return home that night. He had promised to do so, and she had never yet known him to fail in punctuality. He was always prompt to his word. He might possibly be detained until midnight, he had said, but not later, and he would use every endeavor to reach home at eleven o'clock.

"He will be sure to come. Genni is as regular as the clock in his habits," she said, in a reassuring manner to herself, and she took up her sewing and tried to divert her mind by this occupation.

She stitched for a few moments silently. The clock upon the mantle-piece ticked loudly; never before had it made its presence so demonstrative. The sound, in its recurring monotony, began to make her grow nervous.

Her mind wandered again; she pricked her finger with her needle, and then threw down her work, exclaiming, pettishly:

"I can't sew—I'll read to pass away the time."

She found a book, and settled herself comfortably in an easy-chair beside the center-table, on which an Astral lamp was burning, and diffusing a mellow radiance throughout the apartment.

As she opened the book the clock rung out the hour of nine with a silvery chime.

"Two hours!" she cried cheerfully. "That is not long to wait; and reading is the easiest of all ways of killing time."

She laughed pleasantly, and then paused suddenly, and glanced apprehensively around her. It appeared to her as if a hollow, mocking echo had followed her laugh. The lonesome feeling was again oppressing her; it fastened upon her imagination and made it play tricks with her. But she was resolved not to give way to it, and so she turned her eyes determinedly upon the book and began to read.

She did not read a half a dozen pages before her mind wandered from the theme, and the volume dropped listlessly into her lap.

"It isn't a bit interesting," she said. "I wish the children were here—they would be asleep in bed at this time, and that would be company for me. I never knew how dreary this house was before; perhaps it is because I was never left alone here until to-night. Genni prides himself upon having so much land, but I would rather have more neighbors, and less land. I will not be left alone here another night. Though I suppose Genni will laugh at me when he comes, if I tell him how lonesome I was. There, there, I'll try to read again."

By a strong effort she concentrated her mind upon the book, and persevered in its perusal until the clock struck ten.

"Only one hour more!" she exclaimed, joyfully.

But now the restlessness grew upon her. She could not read any longer. She placed the book upon the table, arose, and began to pace the apartment nervously.

By this action you could see that she was a sunny-haired woman, with a clear pink and white complexion, and large blue eyes, with a beseeching look in them. Her form was *petite*, but well proportioned and developed. Her age was twenty-five, but her fair complexion and small figure made her look younger. Hers was one of those pretty, girlish faces that hold their youth far into womanhood.

In short, Jane Bartyne was a pretty, loving, timid little woman without much force or strength of character, and a little vain of her pretty face. But she can scarcely be blamed for that, as she had been flattered enough to make her so. Even Genni Bartyne, stern, strong man of the world as he was, had been dazzled by the beauty of that face, and was proud of having wooed and won the woman who bore it.

And he guarded her with a jealous care which made Jane tremble, despite her knowledge of his great love for her. She knew that his jealousy, once excited, would be as fierce as his love was strong, and so when any attention beyond common civility was offered her she repressed it at once.

This demon of jealousy was the only bad trait in Genni Bartyne's character. To arouse that was to goad him into a fury so closely resembling insanity, that he could hardly be held responsible for his actions during the frenzy.

the best view of the road, and watch for her husband's approach. She knew he would walk, as he prided himself upon his skill as a pedestrian.

From this point she also commanded a view of the creek, as both road and creek came through the cleft in the hills together, at the distance of a hundred rods from where she stood.

Through this gap she expected to see her husband's form advancing.

In a kind of semicircle about her she could see three lights gleaming; these denoted the residences of her nearest neighbors, but the lights twinkled feebly, the distance making them look like glow-worms.

She could but reflect that her loudest cry might fail to reach the ears of those who dwelt within those distant houses. This thought added to the sense of loneliness that was so oppressing to her.

She stood and watched those twinkling lights wistfully. Suddenly one of them was extinguished. A chill seized upon her at its disappearance, it seemed so like an evil omen to her.

As if the extinguishment of one had been a signal to the others, they also disappeared. Jane missed them drearily, and then struggled against the feeling, crying:

"Pshaw! how stupid I am. It is their bed-time and they have retired to rest. They never sit up late. I alone am watchful and wakeful."

The night-breeze sighed through the valley with a mournful sound. Jane shivered.

"I wish he'd come!" she murmured.

The moonbeams lighted up the road, its dusty line contrasting strongly with its dark borders of grass, shrubbery and trees, and they glistened upon the water of the creek in fantastic ripples; but around the gap between the hills, through which they both came, the shadows gathered darkly.

Suddenly a dark form emerged from the shadows into the moon-lighted road.

"It is he!" cried Jane, joyfully.

She stepped quickly into the room and glanced at the clock. Its hands marked the hour as half-past ten.

"He is before his time," she said, and then returned to the veranda.

As her eyes again sought the road she started, and then rubbed them perplexedly. Could she be mistaken? Were two figures advancing instead of one? No, she was not mistaken; two figures were advancing, swiftly, along the road, and a few moments would bring them to the gate that led into her grounds.

Were they her husband, and some chance companion that he had met upon the road, or two travelers on their way to the town of Franklin? This was a question which their actions would alone determine, for she could not recognize any familiar traits in the advancing figures.

The moonlight showed their figures plainly enough, but there was a singularity about them that baffled recognition. She could tell that they were men by the shape of their hats—though she never remembered her husband wearing a felt hat with a broad brim—but they were enveloped in long cloaks, or some loose dark garments, which concealed their limbs, and imparted a sinister, specter-like appearance to them as they advanced, and they seemed to glide rather than to walk along the road.

The road being sandy their footfalls were deadened, and thus they drew near noiselessly. A supernatural feeling seized upon Jane as she breathlessly watched their advance; but when they both paused at her gate, and she saw but one enter, the gate clicking loudly after him, and she heard the footsteps crunching the pebbles of the walk, this feeling passed away, and when he came up the steps of the veranda she sprang toward him exclaiming gladly:

"Dear Genni, I am so glad you have come!"

He caught her in his arms and kissed her, but when she felt that hot, burning kiss upon her lips, she shrieked in alarmed amazement, and retreated swiftly into the room.

He followed her, casting his hat and cloak upon a chair and standing revealed before her.

"Edgar Skelmersdale!" she gasped, as she recognized him.

He inclined his head with a mocking grace, replying:

"Your cousin Edgar."

The hot blood flushed to Jane's face at the recollection of the manner in which she had greeted him.

"How dare you?" she cried, indignantly.

He laughed, negligently.

"Oh, I dare do almost anything—as you will discover presently," he answered, with a sinister significance. "You thought it was that precious husband of yours, Genni Bartyne, did you not? Aha! you would not have rushed so readily to my arms. Never mind, Jennie, the kiss was none the less sweet though it was intended for another."

Her indignation increased.

"You insult me!" she exclaimed.

He folded his arms across his chest and surveyed her with a mocking smile.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" he rejoined, with taunting insolence.

"I will call the neighbors!"

She darted toward the veranda, but by a quick movement he caught her by the wrist, holding her with an iron grip.

"And if you attempt it you will die!" he hissed in her ear. "My friend stands by the gate with instructions to kill you sooner than let you pass. Be quiet and listen to me—you had best, you know me. Now, let us talk."

He released his grasp and Jane sunk pale and trembling into a chair. She did know this bold, bad man, to whom, unfortunately, she was related. She believed him capable of committing any crime. Even when children together she had dreaded the sight of his handsome face, for he had proved himself tyrannical and cruel; and when, as time passed on, and his evil youth developed into worse manhood, and he had sought her love, she had shrank from him in horror and affright.

A disgraceful brawl, in which blood was shed, and all believed him to be the guilty party, had forced him to fly, and Jane breathed more freely when he was gone. It was said that he would never again dare to revisit the town of his birth. It was reported that he had fled to the wilds of Texas and had leagued himself with a gang of horse-thieves there. This was considered congenial company for him;

and the general belief in Franklin was that the next news of him would be, that he had been hung to the branch of a tree by a vigilance committee.

Jane never thought to see him again, and deemed herself free from the persecution of his wild, fierce love. Edgar had falsely stated that they were engaged, and had made such unblushing statements that many people thought Jane loved him, and intended to become his wife, notwithstanding his vicious courses; and when Genni Bartyne sought her she spoke of these rumors concerning herself and her wild cousin, Edgar Skelmersdale. Her denial satisfied him, and they were married.

Six months after the ceremony Jane received a letter. It bore the stamp of a post-office, but was so blurred in the stamping as to be illegible. It contained these words:

"You belong to me, husband or no husband, and I'm bound to have you. EDGAR."

That was all. The letter gave no indication from whence it had been sent.

In alarm Jane took the letter to her husband; but he soon laughed away her fears.

"Let me deal with him when he comes," he said; "but there is no danger of that. Only a braggart and a fool would write such a letter as that."

Jane looked at her husband's tall, muscular frame and compared it with her cousin's slight figure. Edgar Skelmersdale would be but as a child in the strong grasp of Genni Bartyne; and in that strength she confided with a thankful, restful feeling of tranquillity.

So the years passed away, and the name of Edgar Skelmersdale and his wild threats had nearly faded from her memory; but those threats came back to her that night, when appalled by his sudden appearance, she cowered before him in her chair, gazing apprehensively in his dark, evil face.

Edgar Skelmersdale had a slight, graceful figure, of medium height, and a striking face—a face that appealed at once to the female eye. He had always been called handsome, from a boy. His features were regular, the nose aquiline, with a Norman stamp, and his hair was dark-chestnut, thick and wavy, and generally massed carelessly over his high, white forehead; and he wore a large, black mustache, with dropping ends, that added to the romantic look of his face—such a one as Byron's corsair might have worn. His eyes were hazel, but rather small for his other features. Their expression marred his face, for no artifice of his could veil their shifting, treacherous light. All the venom of his nature showed in their glances, as if they had indeed been the windows of his soul, and its vile tenants revealed themselves there. His complexion had a sallow, unwholesome tint, the mark of years of dissipation.

No wonder Jane Bartyne shuddered to find herself alone with this reckless man, and to see his evil eyes gleaming exultingly upon her.

CHAPTER V.

BLOODY WORK.

EDGAR SKELMERSDALE was the first to break the silence between them.

"You never expected to see me again, Jennie, did you?" he said, laughingly—and his laugh always had a mocking ring to it.

"No," she faltered.

She pressed her hand over her heart, as if she could thus stop its painful throbbing, and glanced at the clock on the mantle-piece. It wanted twenty minutes to eleven.

"Thought I was hung by this time!" he continued, in the same mocking manner. "I heard that it was generally predicted after I left Franklin that I would come to be hanged! Ha! ha! ha! But I'm not hung yet, nor likely to be; on the contrary, I'm prospering in the world. I'm at the head of a secret order that's bound to make a fortune for me—for us, I may say, for I intend to have you share it with me."

She shuddered convulsively.

"I?" she ejaculated.

"To be sure," he responded coolly; and apparently enjoying her consternation.

"Oh! you know that is impossible."

"Is it?"

"I am a wife and mother."

"I know it, and curses on the man who made you so!" he cried, fiercely, a malignant scowl convulsing his features. "By a trick he won you from me."

"A trick?"

"Oh, don't pretend to be so innocent. He was the prime mover in the row that drove me away, a fugitive and a branded man. He fastened upon me the odium of a crime which I never committed."

"Then why did you fly if you were innocent?" she asked, simply.

He scowled more darkly than before.

"A man cannot always prove his innocence," he returned. "I knew the people believed me to be guilty—the dog had a bad name—and so I was forced to decamp with all speed, to save my neck from an improvised halter. It would not have been any consolation to me to have had my innocence made manifest after I was hung."

He laughed again, in the sharp, mocking manner so peculiar to him.

She shook her head, doubtfully.

"I think you wrong Mr. Bartyne there," she said.

"He never tried to injure you. Why should he?"

"Why? ha! ha! ha! can you ask that question?" he returned, bitterly. "He wanted you, and I stood in his way, and so he artfully excited the townspeople against me. And he succeeded but too well, curse him! He drove me forth an outcast, and made you his wife, although your heart was mine."

She started impulsively to her feet.

"It is false, Edgar Skelmersdale?" she cried.

"My heart was never yours."

"You gave me good reason to think so," he answered, doggedly.

"Oh, how can you say that?"

"You led me on to love you!" he cried, passionately. "You listened to me—you knew that the hope of my life was to make you mine. Why did you not nip my aspiration in the bud if you had no affection for me?"

Her eye wandered again to the clock. How slowly the minute-hand performed its work! And she was alone, at the mercy of this desperate man. She felt that she must temporize with him, and so gain precious time.

"If I did not check your suit as decidedly as I should have done," she answered, tremulously, "it was because I wished to spare your feelings."

"Oh! oh!" he cried, derisively. "Don't watch the clock, Jennie; he will not come until our interview is over."

A deathly faintness seized upon her frame, and she clutched the back of a chair for support, while a look of horror glared from her eyes.

"Oh, heavens! you have not murdered him?" she gasped.

The laugh with which he followed this piteous question was demoniacal.

"Oh, no," he answered, "I would not kill him, for my vengeance will be worse to him than death. My plans are well contrived. Genni Bartyne will return here to-night to find you gone, and he will be made to believe that you have willfully deserted him to fly with me."

Even her timid nature took up arms at this.

"Never!" she cried, vehemently. "Never will he believe that!—nor shall he have cause to do so, for I will die sooner than go with you!"

He laughed, as if he admired the spirit she thus exhibited.

"Bravely said, Jennie," he rejoined; "but when it comes to the die, your courage will fail you, I'm thinking. You will live, and live with me, and be glad of the opportunity. I have planned it all; it was by my contrivance that you were left alone to-night."

"Yours?" she faltered.

"Yes; I sent the messenger to Caroline, with news of her daughter's illness, and that old colored lady will grumble somewhat when she finds she has had her long tramp for nothing. I knew your husband was absent, and the hour he was expected to return; I knew also that your children had gone to your sister's to spend the night. I have a few faithful followers who serve me well. I might have come here in the dead hour of night, killed all but you, carried you off, and then set fire to the house. But that would not satisfy my vengeance. No—no! I mean that Genni Bartyne shall suffer the same pangs that I suffered when I heard that he had robbed me of you. I know that he loves you, and through you I will inflict a wound upon his heart that no time shall heal!"

"Heavens!" murmured Jane, and she pressed one hand upon her throbbing forehead. A giddy, sickening sensation oppressed her brain. Was it all real, or only a hideous, mocking dream?

Edgar Skelmersdale took a daintily-folded note from his pocket, and opened it.

"Hearken to this," he continued, and then read its contents to her:

"When you find this I shall be far away, happy with the only man I ever loved. JANE."

He held the note before her eyes.

"Look at it—you remember my skill in penmanship, my old talent for imitating others' handwriting—would you not believe you wrote these lines?"

Jane glanced at the writing mechanically, and shuddered; she could scarcely see the letters in the dazed condition of her mind, but she remembered Edgar's fatal skill with the pen, and knew that he had been guilty of forging his father's and uncle's names on several occasions, and had owed his escape from punishment to their forbearance. But at that moment the clock struck the hour of eleven, and the sound gave her courage. Her husband would soon arrive now to free her from the dread torture of this man's presence.

This courage led her to reply:

"Your cunning is fiendish, Edgar, but it will not avail you."

He had marked her change of countenance as the clock struck, and he laughed in his mocking manner.

"I know what is passing in your mind," he cried.

"You think your husband will speedily arrive here—and so he will."

"Let him not find you here, or there will be bloodshed," she answered, gaining more courage from these words.

"Undoubtedly," he returned, with a sinister smile; "there may be bloodshed, but you will be the victim."

"I?" she faltered amazedly.

"Oh! I told you my plans were well laid. Whether you go with me or not, from this night your fair fame will be forever tarnished. He will believe you to be guilty, and an outraged husband's vengeance is swift to fall."

"He will never believe it!" she cried, vehemently.

"He loves me too well ever to doubt my faith."

"The very greatness of his love is the spell I use to overthrow his reason. When he reaches yonder gap between the hills, a second confederate of mine will meet him. He wears the dress of a farm laborer, and can well play the part of one. He will approach him with the honest earnestness of one who sees a man wronged and thinks it his duty to inform him of that wrong-doing. He will tell him that as he passed his house he saw Edgar Skelmersdale in loving converse with his wife, and he might add a kiss passed between them, and tell no lie. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Oh! what a wretch you are!" burst indignantly from her lips.

"You see that you cannot escape from the net I have so skillfully woven around you," he responded exultingly, and not at all resenting the epithet she had applied to him. "Submit, then, to the inevitable, and quietly go with me. I have a boat in waiting in the creek, at the back of the house. My men, favored by the current, can row us swiftly down to the river, and there we can take passage to Pittsburgh, and leave no marks by which the direction of our flight can be traced. Come, make your preparations. Take all your jewelry, and whatever clothing you think you may require—take a whole trunkful if you like; one of my men will carry it to the boat."

Despite her anger and her fear, she could but smile at the cool impudence of this proposal.

"I shall not make any preparation," she replied; "nor will I go with you."

"You must!"

"Force alone will make me leave my husband's roof," she answered.

He drew forth a bowie-knife and flashed the sharp, bright blade before her eyes.

"Beware how you provoke me!" he exclaimed, fiercely.

This action was merely meant to intimidate her; but Jane was now inspired by that reckless feeling that despair brings to the breast of the most timid.

"Kill me, if you will, Edgar Skelmersdale," she cried; "I will never yield to your wishes."

A baffled look came over Edgar Skelmersdale's dark features, and, with a muttered curse, he thrust his keen knife back into its sheath again. His effort to terrify her had proved fruitless.

He paused irresolutely, when a shrill whistle was heard from without, coming from the direction of the gap—the piercing call of a metal instrument, sounding like the shriek of some ill-omened bird upon the night air.

"Ha! he comes—it is the signal!" muttered Edgar. She caught the words.

"My husband! I am saved!" she cried, joyfully.

She sprung toward one of the windows, but he caught her by the arm and restrained her.

"What would you do?" he said.

"Go to meet him!"

"He will kill you!"

"He will not! Or if he would, I had rather die by his hand than live with you!"

"You shall live, and he shall die!" he exclaimed, fiercely, still maintaining his grasp upon her arm. "Your words have sealed his doom. See where he rushes madly to his fate."

Along the dusty road two men were running at full speed, but one, and the larger of the two, was much in advance of the other. He ran as if some strong excitement was giving speed to his limbs.

"See, behind him comes one of my men," continued Edgar; "another awaits him at the gate; and I am here! We are all armed with knife and pistol—three to one against him, what chance has he?"

"Genni! Genni!" she shrieked, loudly.

"You call in vain, he cannot aid you—he can only die in the attempt. Come, to the boat!"

"Never!" she answered.

With his disengaged hand he took a silver whistle from his vest-pocket, and sounded a peculiar call upon it.

"Good-by, Genni Bartyne!" he said, malignantly, as he returned the whistle to his pocket; "you will hear his death-shot presently."

Scarcely had the shrill sound of the whistle died away than the second man on the road slackened his speed, drew forth his revolver and began to fire at the man before him; but he ran on and rapidly approached the gate.

Then the confederate who had been posted there drew forth his revolver and began to fire. This placed the man whom Jane believed to be Genni Bartyne, her husband, between two fires, yet still he dashed furiously forward, as if he bore a charm against bullets.

Jane gazed with starting eyeballs upon this strange scene, with a species of horrible fascination. She saw the flashes and heard the loud reports of the pistols, and at each report she expected to see her husband fall a lifeless corpse in the dust of the road, but still he dashed forward, reckless of and apparently unharmed by this storm of bullets.

Edgar Skelmersdale also watched this strange scene with interest, not unmixed with disappointment as he marked the result of the pistol-shots.

"Curse them!" he cried, fiercely. "Can't they hit him? What's the matter with them?"

The runner reached the gate, there was a confused but only momentary struggle there, and then he came bounding up the gravelled walk.

"I'll fix him!" muttered Edgar, and drew forth his revolver.

But as he did so, Jane grasped the pistol, screaming loudly. Genni Bartyne leaped upon the veranda, and dashed into the room.

The two men without followed swiftly, each clutching a gleaming knife in his right hand.

Then came the report of a pistol, a woman's affrighted screams, mingled with loud curses from men's lips—a furious struggle, during which the lamp was overthrown and extinguished, and then all grew still.

Then two men emerged from the house, supporting a form between them, and went slowly toward the creek.

CHAPTER VI.

A NIGHT'S TRAGEDY.

THE nearest neighbor to Genni Bartyne was Robert Hulsart. His family had all retired to rest when the reports of the pistols broke rudely in upon their slumbers.

The household was soon astir, lamps were hurriedly lighted, and the different members, dressing themselves in all haste in their separate apartments, gathered in the sitting-room.

There was the bluff form of Robert Hulsart, a middle-aged man, his wife, and daughter—a girl of fifteen—the cook and the housemaid, the coachman and the gardener.

The women looked frightened, the men puzzled. The report of pistols in that quiet neighborhood, in the middle of the night, was an unusual and startling circumstance.

What could it mean?

Robert Hulsart, though naturally of an indolent disposition, felt impelled to investigate this matter. He went out upon the veranda—for his house was built in the same style of architecture as Genni Bartyne's—and they all followed him.

The moon was waning now perceptibly, and its lights threw fantastic shadows over the landscape.

Robert Hulsart turned his eyes in the direction of Genni Bartyne's house.

"It appears to me that the shots sounded in that direction," he said.

The coachman and gardener express themselves of the same opinion.

"You heard them, then?" continued Mr. Hulsart. They both answered quickly in the affirmative.

"There was a good many of them."

"More'n a dozen."

"Robbers!" cried Mr. Hulsart, with uncommon energy. "They knew Bartyne was away, and so they have attacked the house in his absence."

"Poor Mrs. Bartyne!" murmured Mrs. Hulsart, sympathetically. "But are you sure Mr. Bartyne is away, Robert?" she asked, in a louder tone.

"Yes, my dear; I spoke to him as he went by this noon. He told me he was going to walk to the town and back—you know what a great walker he is—but he should have been back by this time," he added, reflectively, "for he said he did not expect to be later than eleven o'clock, and it must be nearer twelve now."

"I heard footsteps pass the house not ten minutes ago," cried the coachman.

"You did?" returned Mr. Hulsart, growing more energetic still. "Then there's serious trouble down there. Bring me my musket, Fanny!" This was addressed to his daughter. "Get something in the shape of weapons!" This was to the gardener and coachman. "Genni Bartyne is a man who would defend his property to the last. Heaven help them!—we may arrive too late to do any good—we may find them all murdered—but we will do what we can."

"You may get killed yourself!"

"Oh! don't, pa!"

These exclamations came from his wife and daughter.

"Bring me my musket!" cried Hulsart, peremptorily. "I'm one of the militia, and it's my duty to defend my neighbors."

Both wife and daughter knew that Robert Hulsart could not be dissuaded from any purpose upon which he had once set his mind, and so Fanny reluctantly brought him his musket.

Robert Hulsart grasped the musket, the gardener armed himself with an ax, and the coachman took a pitchfork, and they hurried down the road toward Genni Bartyne's house.

As they advanced from their house, two other parties also approached it from theirs. These two parties were made up of the male inmates of the households of Bartyne's two other neighbors. They also had been alarmed by the pistol-shots, and were hastening to learn the cause of them.

The three parties met and combined before Genni Bartyne's gate; and thus combined they formed quite a force. There were old Samuel Gunhauser and his two stout boys—men grown—and his two negro laborers, and there were William Frelip and his hired man. All bore some kind of offensive weapon, grasped in haste.

A hasty exchange of words showed them that their purpose was the same, and, with one impulse, they rushed through the gate up to the house.

All was dark within, and the wan moonlight shed a sickly light over its silent walls.

"Surround the house!" cried Robert Hulsart.

"Don't let any one escape."

"If there was any one here to escape, they done that long ago," answered old Samuel Gunhauser. "There's death in this house—I feel it—this silence shows it. Bring along your lantern, Tony. Let's go in."

His words caused a hush to come over the excited throng. Silently they ascended the steps of the veranda, and filed through the windows into the apartment where the struggle had taken place.

They were not prepared for the ghastly spectacle that awaited them there.

The moonbeams failed to penetrate within the apartment, but two lanterns had been brought by the party, and their light revealed the dreadful scene.

Tables and chairs were overturned and broken, and in the midst of the ruin, Genni Bartyne sat holding his wife in his arms, her white dress stained with crimson blots, and rent upon the breast and shoulders. Beside Bartyne lay a revolver, and a blood-stained bowie-knife.

He made no movement as they gathered around him, but only stared at them vacantly, with a blank look of anguish on his stern, strong features.

Robert Hulsart bent over them and placed his hand upon Jane Bartyne's forehead, but he drew it back instantly with a shiver.

"Cold as ice!" he exclaimed. "She's dead!"

"Dead?" echoed the throng.

"Look at her!" continued Hulsart. "See the knife-stabs—why, she's cut in half a dozen places—and there's one stab right between the shoulders. Who could have done it?"

"I—I—I—" burst from Genni Bartyne's lips; the tones of his voice sounding hollow and unnatural.

Whether this was a confession of the deed, or an attempt to reveal something, was difficult to determine, and some of his hearers, whose intellect was not of the highest order, received the words literally.

"You!" they cried, amazedly; and a murmur went round among them, a murmur that boded no good to Genni Bartyne.

"But all were not disposed to entertain this opinion.

"He never killed her!" exclaimed Robert Hulsart. "I'll not believe it. Why should he kill her?"

"Ay, why?" added old Samuel Gunhauser, shaking his long white locks gravely.

"Men do strange things through jealousy!"

All started and turned their eyes upon the speaker. It was a new voice to them. They now perceived that two strangers had joined them unperceived. They surveyed them curiously. They were well dressed, and had the appearance of town residents. Their faces bore a singular resemblance to each other—not in the shape of the features, but in their expression. Those features were regular, the complexions clear, and that clearness was brought out in strong relief by bushy, intensely-black eyebrows and large mustaches and imperials, of the same hue. But these faces revealed nothing to the gazer; their immobility was like a shield to the thoughts beneath. These inscrutable faces baffled and bewildered the honest group of countrymen.

"I know he was jealous of her at times," Robert Hulsart, said, in a thoughtful, hesitating manner; "but I don't believe he would have killed her, for all that."

"Nor do I!" added old Samuel Gunhauser.

"If he didn't, who did?" asked the stranger, insidiously.

A murmur came from the lips of William Frelip and Gunhauser's two sons. It was evident that the stranger's words were beginning to exercise an influence over their minds.

"Who, indeed?" cried Frelip.

"Ask him—he'll not deny it," continued the stranger.

"I will," rejoined Robert Hulsart, stoutly. "He'll tell the truth about it—Genni Bartyne would not tell a lie to save his life."

"Ask him!" reiterated the stranger—almost mockingly it appeared to his hearers; and they noticed another peculiarity about him: when he spoke his lips did not move; they remained impassive as the words passed between them.

"Genni Bartyne!" said Robert Hulsart, loudly.

Bartyne did not pay any attention to this.

"Genni Bartyne!" repeated Robert Hulsart. "Don't you know your own name, man?"

Still Genni Bartyne did not heed him. His face retained its vacant look, his eyes still stared blankly before him.

The two strangers exchanged whispers, but this was unnoticed by the others, as they were eagerly awaiting the result of Robert Hulsart's interrogation.

Finding that he could not attract Genni Bartyne's attention by the sound of his voice, Robert Hulsart laid his hand upon his shoulder. The pressure of the hand caused Bartyne to turn his head.

"Who killed this woman?" demanded Robert Hulsart; and he pointed impressively to the body of the hapless Jane.

And again that criminous monosyllable came from Genni Bartyne's lips:

"I—I—I—"

"Why, the man's wits are gone!" cried Robert Hulsart.

"Bah! that's the old game!" exclaimed the stranger. "He's killed his wife, and now he's pretending to be insane to escape from the law's clutches."

A hoarse murmur went around the circle. A strong feeling was setting in against Bartyne. Of all there, he had but two friendly minds—Robert Hulsart and old Samuel Gunhauser were still disposed to believe him innocent.

The stranger skillfully fomented the feeling he had excited against Genni Bartyne.

"He admits the crime, you see, or, at any rate, he does not deny it," he continued. "He killed her in a fit of jealousy, though no doubt he is sorry for it now."

Robert Hulsart shook his head.

"I can't believe he killed her," he made answer. "There were a dozen pistol-shots—could he have fired all of them? My idea is, that there were robbers here, and that they shot her."

"She is not shot," rejoined the stranger. "Her wounds are all by the knife."

"That's so!" affirmed several voices.

"She is stabbed to the heart—one blow was enough—but see how that blow was repeated. If there were robbers here, why has not the house been plundered? We see signs of a deadly struggle here, but not of robbery: Look at that bureau—not a drawer has been touched. If they were robbers, why did they not kill him as well as her?"

"There's an ugly look to this affair," rejoined Frelip. "I can't but think he killed her."

The tide of opinion was setting strongly against Genni Bartyne. The stranger artfully pursued his advantage.

"My theory of the affair is," he continued, "that on his return home, this man surprised a lover with his wife; they exchanged shots, as would be but natural under the circumstances, the lover escaped, and he wreaked his vengeance upon her."

"She was not such a woman!" cried Robert Hulsart, quickly. "Jane Bartyne would never have disgraced her husband's name."

"So much the worse for him, then, if he has killed her in a mad fit of causeless jealousy," replied the stranger. "I don't know what your customs are around here, my friends, as I am a stranger in these parts, but down in Texas, where I come from, we make short work of a case like this."

"Judge Lynch always takes a hand in," added his companion.

It was strange how quickly the throng caught at the idea so artfully conveyed.

"Lynch him!" cried John Gunhauser, old Samuel's eldest son.

"Lynch him!" echoed all but Robert Hulsart and old Samuel Gunhauser.

"No, boys, you mustn't do that," interposed Hulsart. "Let him answer to the law for what he has done."

"Don't go ag'in the law!" followed Samuel Gunhauser.

"The law will suffer him to escape!" cried the stranger.

"As like as not!" rejoined Thomas Gunhauser, the younger son. "So let's hang him on a tree in front of his own house."

This proposal was hailed with acclamation by the workingmen; their destructive feelings were now fully aroused. Robert Hulsart saw this with dismay. He drew old Samuel Gunhauser apart.

"They'll hang him sure, unless we can stop it," he whispered. "Hang him, and he may be innocent. The sheriff of the county lives only a mile from here. I will go with all speed to his house; delay them all you can; I may return in

Then he rode swiftly away.

"We will go with you, Reuben," cried Mrs. Hulsart. "The presence of women may restrain these men from violence. Wait until Fanny and I get a shawl to throw over us. Heaven save us! Genni Bartyne kill his wife! I'll never believe it."

She and Fanny hurried into the house, and they soon returned, each with a shawl thrown over her head and gathered around the shoulders. In this guise they ran down the road toward the scene of the tragedy.

Events had gone swiftly forward there after Robert Hulsart's departure. The men, urged on by the two strangers, were readily induced to take the law in their own hands. The principal one of these mysterious men—the one who had most to say—had taken upon himself the direction of the affair, and they acted, with the unreasoning fury of a mob, upon his suggestions.

It was in vain that old Samuel Gunhauser raised his feeble voice in expostulation—even his own sons refused to listen to him. Indeed they were the fiercest of the throng, and their cries the loudest for speedy vengeance upon Bartyne.

Thomas, the youngest, ran home to get a rope to serve as a halter.

David Jones, Hulsart's gardener, ventured to side with Gunhauser in counseling moderation, but the exhibition of a revolver on the part of one of the strangers, and a peremptory "Shut up!" converted him into a passive spectator.

And all this time Genni Bartyne, regardless of the confusion and menaces uttered against him, sat holding his wife's dead body as tenderly as a mother holds her sleeping infant.

This strange apathy surprised them all, and all, except the old man and the gardener, deemed it proof positive of his guilt.

But when they sought to take her from him, as they did by the order of the stranger, when Thomas Gunhauser arrived, in a breathless condition with the rope—he had run both ways at his best speed—a strange and startling change came over Genni Bartyne. The blank stare changed, and he glared at them like a wild animal at bay.

"Mine—mine—mine!" he muttered hoarsely.

"Take her away—and bind his arms!" cried the stranger. "Get a noose in the halter, quick!"

One of the negroes advanced and grasped the dead woman's arm to pull her away, and the rest crowded around Genni to seize upon him as he arose.

The moment that the negro laid his hand upon Jane, Genni Bartyne seized him, sprung up, and lifting the negro as if he had been a sack of meal, hurled him against the others and scattered them in a confused heap upon the floor.

Both lanterns were broken and extinguished, and darkness enveloped them. Then arose a strange outcry of curses, commands and threats, but loudest of all arose a shrill maniacal scream that made the stoutest heart quiver.

The next moment the pale moonbeams disclosed a dark body vanishing through one of the windows, with a white burden over his shoulder.

"He is escaping!" cried the stranger; and pistol in hand, he darted for the veranda; but one of the men, who had been knocked down, started up in his way, and the stranger fell over him to the floor, his pistol being discharged as he fell. The bullet, fortunately, entered the floor, doing no injury, but the report augmented the general confusion.

"Be careful how you shoot!" growled John Gunhauser. "Tain't safe firing pistols in the dark!"

"Pursue him!" exclaimed the stranger, struggling furiously to his feet. "Would you let him escape?"

All rushed pell-mell upon the veranda; but Genni Bartyne was not in sight. He had disappeared, and he had carried with him the dead body of his wife.

The moon was nearly down, and its light very faint. It was impossible to trace the fugitive in the gathering gloom. Besides, they could not find any clew to show them in what direction he had gone.

When Mrs. Hulsart and Fanny arrived they found their intercession was not needed; and when the sheriff and Robert Hulsart, and a posse, hastily gathered, galloped up in hot haste, they were surprised to hear of Genni Bartyne's flight.

"Where's the strangers?" cried the sheriff. "I'd like to see them."

But the strangers were gone, and no one had noticed their departure.

"They're on his track!" exclaimed William Frelip.

The sheriff shook his head.

"Maybe they are," he rejoined; "but I don't think we'll see them come back. A nice set of men you are, for a civilized community. I'm ashamed of you—and, I hope, you are ashamed of yourselves."

They hung their heads at this reproof; they began to realize that they had acted rather hastily.

"These men may be in pursuit of Genni Bartyne," continued the sheriff, "but I wish they had stopped here to answer a few questions. Who were they—did any of you ever see them before?"

They were obliged to confess that they never had.

"This is a strange business altogether," pursued the sheriff, thoughtfully; "and, I have an idea that these two men know all about it. But Genni Bartyne cannot go far—we shall soon get him, and the mystery will be explained."

But the sheriff proved a false prophet here; for they did not "get" Genni Bartyne, and long years passed away before the mystery of that night was explained.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RAFT UPON THE RIVER.

The raft floated down with the current, being kept in the middle of the stream by the long oar that served as a rudder. Holding this oar, and steering the raft, was a gaunt, raw-boned man, with sharp, prominent features and a freckled face. His hair was a cross between sandy and red, and he had small, keen gray eyes.

His clothes were of the roughest materials, consisting merely of a loose sack-coat (originally striped, but sun and rain had blended the stripes and white ground into a dingy brown), a check shirt, with a broad collar, and a pair of butternut-colored trowsers tucked into the tops of stout calfskin boots; and an old felt hat, with a broad brim, protected his head and face.

The raft was composed of sawn boards and slabs, layer upon layer, fastened securely together, a fav-

rite method of transporting lumber to market. In the center of the raft was a little shed. A piece of stovepipe projecting from its roof, and from which the smoke was then gushing forth in a black volume, showed the purpose for which this shed had been constructed; but it also furnished sleeping accommodations, as well as a place to cook the food of the navigators of the raft.

It was the evening meal that was now being prepared, for the sun had disappeared behind the trees that fringed the western bank of the river and the light of day was fast fading before the approach of night.

"Say, Miry!" the man called out, suddenly.

A female head was thrust out the door of the shed—a head which was the very counterpart of the man's, with this single exception: while his hair might be called sandy, with a strong suspicion of red, hers bore that fiery color, unmistakably. It was drawn back from her forehead and twisted into a knot at the back of the head. Her eyes were the color of his, and her strongly-marked features were as angular and gaunt, and the face was freckled into a reddish tint.

"Well, Ossian?" she answered back, in tones so like his that they sounded like an echo.

"Supper 'bout ready?" he continued.

"Yes."

"We're comin' to the mouth of another crik party soon. They told me at Franklin that there was another one made into the river on the right below. Guess when we come to it I'll lay ag'in' the bank for a spell and eat supper."

"It will be ready. It's a pity you couldn't get somebody to help you. These stops lose us a great deal of time."

"That's so; but there's no help for it. I tried to get a hand at Franklin, but there wasn't none to be found for no wages. It's tough work; but you're just as good as a man, Miry, and I guess we'll get down to Pittsburg in the course of time."

The woman came out of the house and approached the man, and as she stood beside him, the resemblance between them became more apparent, and made their relationship more evident. Only a brother and sister could have looked so much alike; but the likeness was stronger than that of an ordinary brother and sister, for she was nearly as tall as he was, and had the same gaunt, bony figure.

Almira Plummer's face and figure were not calculated to excite admiration in the masculine breast. In her native town of Vermont, she had never had a lover. Instead of looking upon her with favor, the young men regarded her with derision, and bestowed upon her the uncomplimentary names of "A Melancholy Pattern," and "Sorrel Top," and so when her brother (they had been left alone in the world, these two) concluded to try his fortunes in the West, she expressed a desire to go with him, and he consented to her wishes.

So they started together, crossing Lake Champlain to the St. Lawrence river, and up that to Lake Ontario, and so on to Lake Erie, traveling always by water, when possible, as the cheapest method of progression, and pausing at Dunkirk, in New York State. From here they struck across the country to the head waters of the Alleghany river, in Pennsylvania, to engage in the lumber business, an occupation with which Ossian Plummer was very familiar.

Having completed their raft of lumber, their faces were once more turned toward the West, as they floated down with the current of the turbid Alleghany. So anxious was Ossian to get his lumber to market, to meet the high prices then prevailing, that he had started with no other assistant than Almira. The hope that he had entertained of obtaining help at one of the towns or villages upon the banks had so far failed him; but he and Almira had held their course with that tenacity of purpose which is the characteristic of the hardy race from which they had sprung.

"There's the mouth of the crik," said Almira, pointing it out.

"Then I'll run in to the bank. Just in time, by thunder! It'll be dark in ten minutes now."

"If there's a moon to-night, I'd try to keep on," suggested Almira. "You can lay down and sleep, and I will steer the raft."

"That's not a bad idea, Miry, as you can take your snooze in the daytime," he rejoined. "Well, if the moon does come out, I'll try it; but I wish I could hire a hand. It's a long stretch between here and Pittsburg."

The raft ran alongside the bank, and Ossian leaped ashore with the end of a rope in his hand, and made it fast around the trunk of a tree, thus mooring the raft.

He returned to the raft when this was done, saying:

"Now trot out your supper, I'm tolerably sharp set."

"Wait a few moments," said Almira; "I am short of wood, and I wish to gather a few sticks before the light fails entirely. If I do not we shall not have enough to get breakfast with, particularly if we go on by moonlight."

"That's so; but be spry about it."

Almira went ashore, and began to search for decayed branches upon the ground under the trees; but she had not been gone above five minutes, when she returned, empty-handed, to the raft.

"Hallo! What's up?" inquired Ossian; who saw by her face that something was amiss.

"Oh! Ossian! I've found a man," she answered, in quite an agitated manner; and this emotion was the more singular in her, as she was noted for preserving her equanimity under the most trying circumstances.

"Show! You're in luck," returned Ossian, jocosely, "I know you'd been looking for one for some time, but I didn't think you was going to pick him up in the woods out here."

Ossian possessed a dry sort of humor which he indulged in upon occasions, as these remarks proved.

"Don't be a fool, Ossian," she rejoined, sharply. "There's a man yonder, asleep under a tree."

"What kind of a man?" he asked; his curiosity getting the better of his facetiousness.

"A gentleman—with a handsome face, and clothes that were once good."

"That took your eye, eh, Miry? A handsome face and good clothes?"

"Yes; but his clothes are in rags, as if he had

been wandering for days in the wood, and the bosom of his white shirt is stained with blood."

"Show!" ejaculated Ossian: this word always expressed surprise with him.

"I thought at first that he was dead—his face was so deathly pale—that he had been robbed and murdered, and his body dragged to this lonely place; but a second look showed me that he was only sleeping, and that he could not have been robbed, for a heavy gold watch chain was fastened in one of the button-holes of his vest."

"By thunder! he may be a robber or a murderer himself!" cried Ossian, quickly, and not without some trepidation in the tones of his voice. "P'raps, Miry, we have stumbled on a den of cutthroats. Hadn't we better unfasten, and push off?"

He leaped ashore and she followed him, laying a restraining hand upon his arm as he was moving toward the tree to which he had fastened his rope.

"No," she said; there is no danger to us in this man. Come and look at him."

"I'd rather be excused."

"Come!"

She led him into the wood, where the shadows were falling darkly now, and this action, and her words, proved that she was the leading spirit of this strange twain.

They had not far to go. In the very verge of the wood, beneath a large tree, but a few paces from the river's bank, lay the man, with his garments rent to tatters, with gory blood-stains on the bosom of the white shirt—white once, but now sadly defaced and torn—with an unshaven beard, matted hair—he was bare-headed—and a face as ghastly as death itself.

He was sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion. It appeared as if he had dropped down, after a mad flight through the wood, and sleep had surprised him where he fell.

He was a strange sight to our two Vermonters, and Ossian expressed his perplexity in these words:

"Now you've found him, Miry, what are you going to do with him?"

"Take him along with us," replied Almira.

"Show!"

Ossian was more astonished than he had ever been before in his life.

"Take him along with us!" he continued; getting his breath back after the shock.

"Yes; this man has been flying for his life—"

"To save his life, more likely," interrupted Ossian, discontentedly. "How do we know but what he is a murderer with a price set upon his head?"

"We can soon find that out."

"How?"

"Wake him up, and question him."

Ossian drew back in alarm, stammering:

"Wake him! Why, he's big enough to eat us both! Don't you do it! Let's get back to the raft, and push off. Better leave him where he is."

"Don't be a fool!"

"Well, if I ain't 'tain't for want of your not telling me to be one," grumbled Ossian.

"You want help upon the raft," continued Almira, composedly, "and I think this man will gladly go with us—more, I think we may save his life by taking him along."

Ossian yielded to her, as he generally did, but it was in an ungracious manner.

"Go it, old gal!" he remarked, dryly: "you wouldn't be a woman if you didn't insist on having your own way."

Almira did not answer this, but knelt beside the sleeper and placed her hand upon his shoulder. The presence of that hand did not awake him. Then she shook him gently, but he only moaned in his sleep. She shook him more vigorously, and then, suddenly, he burst from the bonds of slumber, starting up fiercely, wildly, his eyes glaring with a lurid light, and crying out:

"She's mine! you shall not take her from me! in life we were one, and in death we shall not be divided."

But when he saw this strange woman kneeling beside him, and caught the look of sympathy upon her face, his mood changed, and he burst into a discordant laugh—a laugh that curdled Ossian Plummer's blood in his veins, and caused him to draw back warily, and cast a glance over his left shoulder in the direction of the raft, as if calculating how quick he could shorten the distance between himself and it; but when he reflected that the raft was securely moored to the bank and he would not be any safer there than where he was, he stood his ground.

Ossian did not lack courage upon occasion, but he preferred to avoid trouble when he could.

"Compose yourself, we would befriend you," said Almira, soothingly.

He passed his hand over his brow.

"Was it all a dream?" he demanded. "Where am I?"

"Here you are!" answered Ossian, in a matter-of-fact manner, stepping forward.

The stranger laughed again discordantly, and Ossian took another glance over his shoulder.

"Here!" repeated the stranger. "But where is here?"

"Don't you know?" inquired Almira.

"No—I know nothing—remember nothing since that night—when—"

He paused abruptly, and a strong shudder convulsed his frame.

"Tell me—what day of the week is it?" he asked, after this strange pause.

"Wednesday."

The stranger shuddered again.

"And that was Monday,"

The Masked Band.

on the subject but he still had his objections; the next words of the stranger, however, removed them.

"You will find it to your advantage to let me go with you," he continued, observing Ossian's reluctance; "wretched as I appear I am not without means, and I might help you to a fortune some day."

"That's what I'm a-lookin' for," returned Ossian in his dry fashion. "I guess we'll take you along."

"We will take you with us," said Almira, "not for any reward, present or to come, but because I think you are in danger here and would gladly leave this place."

"You are right," he answered; "I would disappear so utterly and entirely that the world which once knew me shall know me no more."

Ossian's curiosity was excited by these words.

"What might you have done, and what might your name be?" he inquired.

"For what I have done I will answer to Heaven in its own good time," replied the stranger, evasively. "I have no name—no country—nothing—stay—yes—they live! That tie alone binds me to earth. But for them I would have sunk to a watery grave with her—for them, and vengeance upon him! the destroyer! Ah! the wide earth shall not hide him from me—I'll find him yet—I'll find him yet!"

Ossian clutched Almira's arm in dismay, and whispered in her ear:

"He's mad!—crazy as a loon!"

"It is the delirium of fever, not madness," she answered back. Then she addressed herself to the stranger.

"Come, you must be faint from hunger—come and eat with us."

He did appear faint as he moved forward, and observing that his steps tottered she offered him her arm to support him toward the raft.

"You are a true woman!" he exclaimed, gratefully.

"Yes," said Ossian, taking his other arm; "she's a melancholy pattern, but her heart's in the right place."

They led the stranger on the raft, and conducted him to the little shed, and placed him on a stool before the rude table.

"One other favor," he said, as Almira was about to serve the supper. "Will you cast off the raft and let it float down the stream while we eat? I could not swallow a morsel while we were fastened here."

"Cast off!" Almira told her brother.

Ossian hastened ashore to comply.

"Afraid somebody will come and ketch him," he muttered, as he untied the rope.

Then he threw the rope upon the raft, followed it, and taking his boat-hook pushed off from the shore. The raft swung off into the current, and floated onward.

Ossian went to the shed.

"We're off," he said.

While he had been thus occupied Almira had lighted a lantern and placed the supper upon the table.

"Very well," she rejoined. "You two eat, and I will steer the raft until you finish."

She went to the steering-oar, and Ossian took his place at the table opposite the strange fugitive.

"Fall to," he cried; "make yourself to home, and don't spare the vittles."

The stranger complied, eating with the keen appetite of one who has fasted long. Ossian watched him covertly while he thus satisfied his hunger, and noted his white, and well-shaped hands, the regular, handsome features of the pale face, and the graceful, sinewy chest, shoulders and arms.

"He never did no hard work," Ossian told himself, confidentially.

After a while the stranger's hunger was appeased and he pushed the plate away from him, and evinced a desire to converse by saying:

"What was the last town you passed on the river?"

"Franklin," answered Ossian.

"Ha!" cried the stranger, with interest.

Ossian's curiosity was again excited.

"Are you acquainted there?" he asked.

"I know the place," was the reticent answer.

"Have you any idea where it was you found me?"

"Yes; it was at the mouth of the crik, the next one you come to after passing French Crik; that's at Franklin, you know?"

"Then it must have been in crossing French Creek that I lost her," muttered the stranger, thoughtfully. "I must have been out of my head for two days. Ah! what a stain is cast upon my name!"

Ossian caught quickly at this.

"What did you say it was?" he asked, cunningly.

This question roused the stranger from his abstraction.

"Eh! what—what?" he cried.

"Your name?"

"Pshaw!" ejaculated the stranger, brusquely.

"Shaw! eh! that's a good name," returned Ossian, accepting this ejaculation for a name. "There was a family of Shaws where I come from, but I don't suppose you are any relation to them?"

The stranger burst into a loud laugh; the mistake that Ossian had made appeared to amuse him greatly; and yet a close observer would have noted that this man gave way to mirth as a means or method of diverting his mind from harrowing thoughts.

"No, no," he answered; "but tell Mr., Mr.—by the way what is your name?"

"Plummer, Ossian Plummer. What might your first name be?" added Ossian, congratulating himself upon having established confidential relations with the stranger.

"P. Shaw," was the answer, with another laugh.

"P. for Peter?"

"Yes—ha! ha! ha! Peter Shaw—ha! ha! ha!—now you know me, eh?—ha! ha! ha! Don't tell any one, Plummer. And now let me get you to do something else for me. Your supper has put new life into me—I feel like another man. I wish to be another man—to lose my identity. Have you any old clothes aboard here that you would like to sell for a good price? Luckily, I have kept my pocket-book safe, in all my wanderings, and here it is, with a few hundred dollars for present emergencies."

He produced his pocket-book as he spoke, and placed it on the table. Ossian's eyes glistened as he beheld it.

"I kin jest accommodate you," he rejoined. "I've

got a trunk full of rough clothing, and boots and shoes and hats, that I took in the way of dicker at Warren. You see I calculated to hire some hands to help me on the raft, and thought I could dispose of them."

"You want help?" cried the stranger, eagerly.

"Yes, I would like two men, but could get along with one. I might get aground on a sand-bar, you know."

"I'll be your man—and I can do the work of two, as you will see, when I get recruited up. Get me out a suit of clothes, boots and hat complete, and let me pass for your hired man—you shall fix your own price for them. I wish to get rid of these bloody, ragged garments as speedily as possible."

The stranger looked at the blood-stains and shuddered; they appeared to recall some dread tragedy vividly to his mind.

The trunk to which Ossian had alluded was in the shed, and he at once opened it, and overhauled its contents for the stranger.

"I'll get you as near a fit as I can," he said, "and you can make a change, and then we'll give Miry a chance for her supper."

"Miry? The woman—your sister?"

"Yes."

"I thought so from the resemblance."

"Looks like me, eh?"

"Very much."

Ossian chuckled.

"And we won't neither on us be hung for our beauty, eh? Try them boots—they may be a trifle large, but I guess they'll do. There's a pair of pants that I think are about your size; there's a westkit, a shirt, and a pea-jacket."

"They will do admirably."

The stranger made the change of garments in a few moments, and rolled his torn and bloody clothes into a bundle. Then he went to the edge of the raft and cast them into the darkly-flowing stream.

Ossian watched him curiously.

"Thus ends the old existence and the old name," muttered the stranger, "and now begins another. Peter Shaw—ha! ha! ha! Bear up, stricken heart! the bitter past is to be redeemed, and a brighter future secured for them—for them! Ah! but for them I would leap into the dark river and end both life and misery together. But no, no! my life has yet its work to do!"

"Who is he, and what in thunder has he done?" was Ossian's puzzling thought.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOWN THE CHIMNEY.

WE will now return to Etta Ward and Kate Vehsage, in their humble home in New York.

Having shown what happened in the past, I will now show the bearing of these events upon the present.

The girls sat in their room, by the light of a kerosene lamp which was placed upon the table between them.

Both were sewing busily, working the button-holes in a number of shirts that had been made upon a sewing-machine by one of their neighbors, and they had taken them to finish.

It was some little work to do, and they were thankful to get it.

The night wore on apace, and they worked steadily, exchanging but few words, each seemingly intent upon her own thoughts; and these thoughts, judging by the gravity of their faces, were not of an encouraging or exhilarating nature.

There came a knock at their door, causing them both to start, and showing how deeply they had been immersed in reflection.

"Come in!" cried Kate, in her abrupt manner.

"Oh! it's getting late, and you don't know who it is," remonstrated Etta, with some slight show of apprehension.

"Yes, I do—it's old Glackmeyer, come after his rent—who else should it be?"

Kate shrugged her shoulders defiantly as she uttered these words.

"And we haven't got it!" murmured Etta, with a sigh of despondency.

The door opening and admitting a portly man, with a fat, reddish face, and a decided German cast of features, confirmed the truth of Kate's assertion.

The man was the landlord of the tenement house in which they lived, a wealthy German, long since naturalized as a citizen of the land of his adoption.

"Good-evening, girls," he said, standing before the door, with his hand upon the knob, and thereby intimating that his visit was to be a very brief one.

He had a pleasant-sounding voice, strongly marked by a German accent.

"Good-evening, Mr. Glackmeyer," responded Kate.

Mr. Glackmeyer stood by the door, looking at the girls, and the girls, with their work in their lap, sat looking at him.

It was an embarrassing pause to all three.

Mr. Glackmeyer cleared his throat with a little dry cough, and began again:

"You see, girls, I happened to be down this way, and so I thought I'd call in for—ahem! eh? You know—"

"Your rent?" supplied Kate.

Mr. Glackmeyer smiled, deprecatingly, as if he thought he was taking a liberty and wished to be excused. There was nothing of the hard-hearted landlord about him.

"Exactly," he responded.

"Well, we haven't got it," said Kate, desperately.

"No?" rejoined Mr. Glackmeyer, in an inquiring manner.

"Not a dollar toward it."

Mr. Glackmeyer looked grave.

"It is now three weeks in the new month," he urged, but in a very considerate manner.

"We know it," answered Kate.

"Ah!" cried Mr. Glackmeyer, and he let go his hold of the door-knob, and ran his fat fingers through the thin locks of light hair above his forehead, reflectively.

"You haven't got it?" he added, interrogatively.

"No; work has been very slack with us, lately."

"Ah!" cried Mr. Glackmeyer, again. "Times are hard," he admitted, after another slight pause. "You don't know when you might get it, eh?"

This question was put suggestively.

"I might as well be honest with you," replied Kate, in her blunt way; "we do not see any present prospect of getting the money for the rent. It is as much as we can do to earn enough now to get something to eat, and our fare is by no means luxurious, I can tell you."

"I suppose not," said Mr. Glackmeyer; "but I want my rent," he added.

These words were uttered more in a bewildered than in a menacing manner.

"I wish I had it to give you," answered Kate.

Mr. Glackmeyer rubbed his fat forehead with his knuckles, perplexedly; it had a shiny look, as if he was very much in the habit of polishing it in this manner.

"You have always paid regular before," he said.

"That was because we had it, but now we haven't got it, we can't pay it, don't you see?"

This logical deduction was plain even to Mr. Glackmeyer's somewhat dull perception.

"That's so," he acknowledged. "You haven't got it?" he continued, reviewing the situation, as it were.

"No."

"And you don't know when you can get it?"

"Yes."

These monosyllabic answers made Mr. Glackmeyer stare blankly.

"What are we going to do about it?" he demanded, perplexedly.

"What are you going to do about it?" answered Kate.

This question increased Mr. Glackmeyer's perplexity.

"I?" he said.

"Yes. We can't do anything. We are utterly helpless. We are willing enough to work if we could only get the work to do—and there's hundreds of poor girls in this great city just as bad off as we are—but as we can't get the work we can't earn the money, and so we can't pay the rent. It doesn't require much arithmetic to sum that up."

"No," responded Mr. Glackmeyer, shaking his head gravely.

"So, as we can't do anything," continued Kate, desperately, "you'll have to warn us out, I suppose."

"Verdampter!" cried Mr. Glackmeyer, breaking out with this expletive in his native tongue explosively, and giving the girls quite a start. "You pay me when you get it," continued Mr. Glackmeyer, excitedly; "you stay here until you do. I know you—you are good girls, both!" His eyes lingered for a moment with a wistful glance upon Etta's fair face. "All right! When you get it, pay me—I'll wait!"

Mr. Glackmeyer retreated precipitately from the room, and closed the door after him.

Kate burst into a laugh.

"Isn't he a jolly old Dutchman?" she exclaimed.

Etta looked at her companion, in surprise.

"Why, Kate, I think he is real kind," she replied. "Few landlords, of such houses as this, would permit us to remain and trust to time and accident for his rent. I thought we would be turned out, sure."

Kate laughed again.

after, I can tell you. Why, he's worth a mint of money."

"I don't want his money. I don't believe in marrying a man for his money, if you don't love him!"

This positive assurance on the part of Etta, disconcerted Kate's matrimonial speculations.

"And I don't believe in love!" she returned. "Of the two I would rather have the money than the love. I would never marry a poor man. I believe in the truth of the old saying: 'When Poverty comes in at the door, Love flies out of the window.' I only wish I had such a chance as you have got with old Glackmeyer, that's all. You'd see how quick I would jump at it! Why, he owns this whole house, and the next one to it, and the one round the corner, and besides, he's got a sausage factory, or a lager beer brewery, somewhere up-town, or over in Williamsburg—I've heard him speak of it; and he's an old bachelor, never been married—he told me that one day when I was paying him the rent. He asked me why I didn't get married, I remember, and that led him on to speak of himself. I know just what he wants for a wife, a girl with a face like yours, Etta; and wouldn't he be proud of you? Why, he would fairly worship the ground you walked on; and dress you up like a Princess, and you could do just whatever you pleased with him. Ah! wouldn't I like to have such a chance? But there's no such luck for me."

Kate sighed enviously.

Etta was by no means dazzled by the brilliant prospect so graphically presented by Kate. She smiled at Kate's earnestness.

"And I don't want any such luck," she answered. "When Mr. Glackmeyer proposes to me, if he ever does—"

"He will!" interrupted Kate, confidently.

"Very well, then I shall respectfully decline his offer; and, if you like, I will speak a good word for you."

Kate tossed her head.

"As if that would do me any good!" she said.

"It might! who knows? If he is very anxious for a wife—"

"Men like to choose their own wives."

"I suppose so; but men don't always get what they choose, as the object of their choice has an opinion in the matter."

"That's true enough," Kate admitted.

"And when they find they can't get one, they select another."

Kate was impressed by this remark.

"I have no doubt of that," she answered; "but how comes it that you know so much about love and courtship?" she added, surprisedly. "I thought I had seen more of the world, and knew more about such matters than you."

Etta smiled again as she replied:

"Very possibly you do, my dear, though I have used my eyes and ears during my brief experience of life; and then I have read a great many books, for I was always fond of reading."

"Ah! you are not so innocent as you look!" cried Kate, with conviction. "You are one of the still kind, that say little, but observe everything. There's more go ahead to me; but I guess you know the most."

Etta shook her head deprecatingly.

"I make no pretensions to knowledge," she answered. "I know that I have a pretty face—how can I help it, when you have told me of it so often?"

"Well, it's the truth! and you are not a bit vain of it. Many a girl with your face, would be so conceited, that there would be no living with her."

Etta sighed pensively.

"I have often wished that I was plainer," she said.

Kate stared at her incredulously.

"Oh! come, I can hardly believe that is an honest wish," she cried.

"It is, I can assure you. Beauty is a dangerous gift to a girl circumstanced as I am. It subjects me to insults which are hard to bear, and impossible to resent. You have saved me from much persecution and annoyance."

Kate smiled grimly.

"I have guarded you like a dragon," she answered. "They call you the angel, and me the she-griffin, I know it."

Kate showed some resentment here.

"Ah! they don't dare to insult me. But there would be no insult in old Glackmeyer asking you to become his wife, would there?" pursued she, coming back to this subject, artfully.

"Perhaps not; only an annoyance."

"Nonsense! you needn't take him if you do not want him."

"I do not intend to. I can not be bought like a slave for gold."

"I don't see it in that light. Don't you think you could love the old man, in time, if he gave you a fine house to live in, lots of good clothes, and let you do as you please?"

"No, I do not," replied Etta, with a positiveness that was in contrast with her usual gentleness.

"But you don't love anybody else?"

"No; doubtless I shall one of these days, but the hero of my romantic dreams has not yet made his appearance."

Kate shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah! romance and reality are two different things. This is a bread-and-butter world, and one can't live on air. I wish we could! It wouldn't cost much for household expenses then. Well, as I said before, if I had such a chance as old Glackmeyer, I wouldn't let it slip."

"And as I said before," returned Etta, smilingly, "I will transfer Mr. Glackmeyer to you. If he proposes to me I will tell him that I am entirely unsuited for the position he desires to fill, but that you will make him a most excellent wife."

Kate looked highly gratified.

"Do you think I would?" she asked.

"I think you are just what he wants. You are economical, a good housekeeper, prudent and thrifty. What more can a man desire in a wife?"

Kate shook her head as if she had doubts about the facility of this transfer.

"He desires a pretty face, even if it belongs to a sloven—no allusions to you, my dear, for a sloven you are not," she cried. "Your pretty face would win a dozen husbands, when my thrift and prudence would fail to get one."

"And yet if I could summon some good fairy, such as used to come in the olden time—why don't they come now, I wonder?—I would, with her aid, change faces with you."

The magnanimity of this offer made Kate's sharp eyes glisten.

"I know you would, dear," she exclaimed, fervently. "You are just the best little soul in the world. But there's no good fairies, and precious little else that's good, now-a-days. The old gentleman is the only one that's left now—and he's at work on earth still, I verily believe."

Etta looked up from her work surprisedly at this. They had not neglected their sewing while they conversed, but had kept their fingers as busy as their tongues.

"The old gentleman—who do you mean?" she asked.

"Don't you know?—Old Nick, to be sure."

"The d—"

"Hush! He may be nearer than you think. Oh, la! What's that?" cried Kate, with an apprehensive start.

The clock on the mantle-piece had given a sudden "whirr."

"It's only the clock; it's about to strike," said Etta.

"And twelve, too, I declare! Where has the night gone to? And these shirts not done yet, and we promised to give them in the first thing in the morning."

"We must finish them before we go to bed," answered Etta, placidly.

Kate yawned.

"Yes, we must, and I'm getting awful sleepy, and my back's tired; isn't yours?"

"A little."

"Ah! I've heard of Patience on a monument, or something of that sort, but I think you could put her out of countenance. Why don't some good fairy come and give us a wish each? I don't ask but one wish—that would be quite enough for me."

"Why, what would you wish for?"

"All the money there is in the world," answered Kate, composedly. "If I had that I could get anything else I wanted, you know."

Etta broke into a rippling laugh.

"I should think so," she answered. "But why don't you call on Old Nick, as you believe he is still roaming about the world? he is said to be very liberal to those who summon him."

"Oh, I daren't!" rejoined Kate, with a shiver.

"He'd want my soul."

Etta laughed again.

"Why, Kate, surely you don't believe he would come if you called him, do you?" she cried.

"I wouldn't like to risk it—it's after midnight, and an awful time to try. Hear how loud the clock ticks."

"I would like to try!" exclaimed Etta, amused by this superstitious trait in the composition of the usually strong-minded Kate. "Look out for him! Lucifer, appear!"

There came a rattling crash, and some heavy body descended through the chimney, and struck with a dull thud in the fire-place. The fire-board and stove-pipe were hurled down.

Both girls started to their feet with terror, but they were too much astonished to scream.

"Oh, what's that?" gasped Etta.

"It's him—the d—, you know," stammered Kate. "You've brought him, sure enough! That's the way he always comes—down the chimney."

"Oh! but it can't be!"

"Oh! but it is! See, there he is!"

The two girls were clinging together and staring into the fire-place.

"It's a man!" whispered Etta.

"Of course it is—he always comes in that shape, and wears boots so that you can't see his cloven feet."

Etta began to recover her composure.

"This is some accident," she said. "A man has fallen down the chimney."

"Pooh! how did he get there?"

"He may be a sweep!"

"They don't sweep chimneys at this time of night."

CHAPTER IX.

A MIRACULOUS ESCAPE.

ETTA went to the table and got the lamp.

"Let me look at him," she said.

"He'll come out fast enough. If we must sell our souls let's make the best bargain we can."

"Nonsense, Kate! this is a human being like ourselves."

"She held the lamp to the fireplace.

"Heavens! look! his face is all bloody!" she exclaimed.

"No, he's not."

"Then what makes his face so black?"

"It's the soot from the chimney."

"La! I never thought of that."

"Oh! I'm afraid he's dead. See how quiet he lies."

A faint moan came from the lips of the man, who lay all doubled up in the fireplace.

"No, he lives!" said Etta, eagerly. "We must try to help him."

Satisfied that their strange visitor was not Old Nick, Kate put aside her superstitious fears, and exerted her womanly qualities.

"To be sure," she rejoined. "Take hold with me, and let's get him out of the fireplace. Oh! hasn't he smashed up things generally? Put your lamp on the table, and bear a hand."

"The fire-board does not matter," answered Etta, as she replaced the lamp upon the table; "that can easily be fixed again. I'm afraid the man is very badly hurt."

"What on earth could have induced him to come diving down our chimney?"

"It is very strange! I do not see how he got in it."

"He must have got in from the top. I noticed that it was broken away the last time I was upon the roof."

During these comments they grasped the man, each taking hold of an arm, and by a violent exertion succeeded in dragging him into the middle of the floor. He moaned twice during this operation,

thus assuring the girls that the spark of life still lingered in his body.

They gazed curiously upon him.

"Oh! what a big man he is!" cried Kate, breathlessly. "Pew! I wonder how much he weighs? Two hundred, I should think. And he isn't a chimney-sweep."

"No."

These words were called forth by the man's dress, and the sight of a heavy gold hunting watch, which, dislodged from his pocket by his fall, rested upon his thigh, secured by the chain, which was hooked into one of the button-holes of his waistcoat. The gold watch and chain glistened strangely in the lamp-light.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Kate, taking up the watch and weighing it in her hand. "What a splendid watch, and what a nice chain, too! Why, he must be rich to carry such a watch and chain! Who in the world can he be, and how did he get in the chimney?"

Etta shook her head, replying simply, "I cannot say." The affair was entirely beyond her comprehension. "I will get some water and wash the black and blood from his face."

"Do! I declare I don't see how he came down." Kate went to the fireplace to look up, and made a discovery. "Hallo! What's this?" she cried, stooping to pick something up.

"What have you found?"

"A pocket-book, and a fat one. It must have fallen from his pocket."

Kate took it to the table to examine its contents by the aid of the lamp.

"Oh, my! it's just full of greenbacks!"

"We must take care of it for him."

"Oh, yes. But don't I wish finding was saving!" Kate sighed regretfully as she closed the pocket-book and left it on the table.

Etta got a basin of water, a sponge, and a towel, and kneeling beside the man, who lay on his back on the carpet, she began to remove the red and black stains from his face. These stains so disfigured his visage as to render his features indistinguishable. Kate watched the proceeding curiously.

"Let's see what he looks like when his face is clean," she said.

The stains were quickly removed.

"Oh, my! he's a real nice-looking man!" cried Kate. "Why, he's a gentleman, Etta."

"He is."

"Is he badly hurt?"

"I cannot tell. He does not open his eyes. He seems to be stunned."

"Let me feel if his heart beats. Yes—yes—it does. Oh, Etta! we must have a doctor. He's able to pay for one, and he's able to pay us for any trouble he may put us to—not that it matters, only it's just as well to have it so these hard times. I'll go for Doctor Hunter right away. He's the nearest doctor that I know, and I think I can get him here very shortly. I will run around to his house at once. You look out for him while I'm gone."

Kate put on her hat and shawl and hurried from the room.

Having cleaned the man's face, and dried it with the towel, Etta got a pillow from the bedroom, and placed it under his head to raise it from the floor.

A sigh burst from the man's lips—a sigh of relief, it appeared to her. She was kneeling beside him, gazing earnestly into his face, and studying intently his features, which appealed strongly to her sympathy, when the closed lids of his eyes were slowly raised, and a pair of keen gray eyes glanced into hers.

peared to her to be something mysterious, almost supernatural, in the manner of his coming; and his evident belief that he knew her—that she was near and dear to him—bewildered and perplexed her.

She shivered as she gazed upon him. Was this calmness that had come upon his face death, or merely a relapse into insensibility? It was not the kind of death that had smitten her aunt so suddenly. She remembered her rigid face, and staring, glassy eyes. This man looked as if he was asleep, and a smile of calm content was on his lips.

Her face had given him comfort, that was plain to her. He had clasped her in his arms, as if he had recovered one long lost, and dearly loved; one he had thought to be dead; his words revealed that much.

What could it mean?

A new thought occurred to Etta, and solved this problem in her mind: This man must be insane—all madness is not of a raving nature. She had read enough to tell her that—he had escaped from the asylum, or the custody of friends, perhaps, and in his wanderings had fallen down the chimney. Who but a crazy man would have been upon the roof at such a time of night? And his madness gave her a resemblance in his eyes which did not exist in reality. This reasoning was very plausible to her. In no other way could she account for the strange words he had addressed to her; and yet there was one perplexity in her mind which this reasoning could not altogether overcome.

He had addressed her as "Jane." What was there in that name that sounded so familiar to her, so like an echo from the dim and misty past, which clouded her childish recollection?

She knelt down again beside the man, and laid her hand gently, caressingly, upon his broad forehead; it was warm to her touch, and his lips quivered as if he was still breathing.

"Surely this is not death?" she murmured.

She had a confirmation that it was not; for, as if there had been some charm in the gentle pressure of her hand, the man's eyes again opened.

"It is no dream," he said, gaspingly; "Jane—you are here—don't leave me!"

"Oh! I do wish the doctor would come," cried Etta. "He could tell what ails him."

As if the wish had brought him, the door opened, and Kate ushered Doctor Hunter into the room.

"Here he is," she said, pointing to the man.

"Hold the lamp," said the doctor, and he knelt down beside the man, opposite Etta.

He was a skilled practitioner, and proceeded at once to administer a strong cordial to the man, talking as he did so.

"A most singular case," he said. "Surprising! Ah! that will put new life into him. Most astonishing! Let's see if any bones are broken. Has he shown any signs of pain?" This question to Etta, as he felt each limb of the man, with a rapid but skillful touch.

"No, sir," she answered.

"Wonderful! And he came down the chimney head first, you say?"

"He just did!" replied Kate; "and with an awful thump!"

"Surprising! His limbs are sound, but his head appears to be badly bruised."

"I think he has hurt his head badly," said Etta.

The doctor paused in his examination of the man, to glance at her surprisedly.

"Eh eh! What makes you think so?" he said.

"Because he appears to be out of his mind."

"Out of his mind, eh?—and no wonder; the only wonder is that he isn't out of his body. Has he been raving?"

"No, sir; not raving; but he has spoken to me as if he knew me—called me by a name that is not mine."

"Ah! ah! I see—delirious. Feverish, of course—no! Why, his pulse doesn't beat like a fever."

The man opened his eyes.

"Help me up!" he said, calmly.

"Surprising!" ejaculated the doctor. "Are you weak?"

"As a child!"

"I'll get him into that rocker."

But the doctor's intention was beyond his strength. He could not raise the man from the floor. He grew quite red in the face from his efforts.

"Let me help you; I'm as strong as a man," cried Kate.

The doctor gladly availed himself of her assistance, and, between them, they got the man into the rocker, Etta placing the pillow for his head to rest upon.

"Take another dose of my cordial," said the doctor, "and you'll find your strength come back."

The man swallowed the cordial with the submission of a child.

"Now, you'll do. Your head is pretty well bumped—I can feel several contusions, but I don't find any bones broken."

"Heaven has been merciful to me," answered the man; and the strengthening tones of his voice proved the virtue of the good doctor's cordial.

"I should say so!" cried the doctor. "But how in the world did you come down the chimney?"

The man's face assumed a vacant look.

"Chimney?" he replied. "What chimney?"

"Why this?"

"Did I come down there?"

"Why, don't you know you did?"

"I? No!"

"Don't you know how you got here?" cried the doctor, surprisedly.

"Here?—I am at home. Jane will tell you so. She is not dead—it was all a hideous dream—I awoke and found her bending over me. Jane, tell him."

"You see it is as I told you," Etta whispered to the doctor. "What am I to do?"

The doctor shook his head dubiously.

"This may be madness," he said, apart to her, "but if it is, it is the strangest case I ever saw. We must try to undeceive him. Speak to him—I wish to test his sanity."

Etta came from the back of the rocker, and stood before the man.

"Why do you call me Jane?" she asked him. "It is not my name."

The vacant look was still upon his face.

"No?" he questioned, dreamily. "And yet so like?"

"Who do you take her to be?" demanded Kate Vehslage, curiously.

"Strange!" he murmured to himself. "I see the hand of heaven in this. My child, how old are you?"

"I am nearly eighteen," she replied.

"Ah! and she, if she had lived, would now be—and I thought the bitter past was all a dream"—these incoherent words muttered to himself, and his hearers catching them indistinctly, and making nothing of them; then adding abruptly, and quite distinctly: "Girl, what is your name?"

"Henrietta Ward."

"Henrietta?" repeated the man, forcibly. He made an effort to rise, but sank back again. "It must be, thank God!"

They gazed at him curiously.

"For what?" asked Kate, inquisitively.

The man broke into a laugh that jarred upon their ears, it came so hoarsely and gaspingly from his lips.

"That I'm alive!" he answered. "Ah! this is beyond my hopes. They said they were dead—both—and had I not been convinced of it, I would have searched the wide earth through, but I would have found them. Providence watches over all, and is most kind when we least expect it."

"What does he say?"

"Rubbish!" answered the doctor. "His brain is affected; there's no mistake about that."

But the next words of the man were so calmly spoken that the good doctor was ready, in his bewilderment, to recall the opinion so confidently advanced.

"You say your name is Henrietta Ward?" he inquired of Etta.

"That is the name I have always borne," she replied.

"Always?"

She hesitated a moment, and then answered: "To the best of my knowledge."

"Ah! Did you ever know any one by the name of Aylward?"

"Aylward?"

"Yes."

He awaited her reply with eagerness.

She shook her head thoughtfully.

"I don't think I ever did," she answered.

CHAPTER X.

KATE'S ADVENTURE.

THE man appeared disappointed by her reply.

"Try your memory," he urged—"go back to the days of your infancy—when you were very young—think now—fix your mind—does not the name of Aylward sound familiar to your ears?"

Etta reflected profoundly for a few moments, while Kate and the doctor looked on with eager interest.

"No," answered Etta, at length; "I cannot recall the name; I do not think that I ever heard it before. My aunt's name was Ward."

"Aylward and Ward—singular!" muttered the man, more to himself than her. "One syllable has dropped out of your childish memory."

"Oh, no, it has not!" cried Etta, quickly. "I remember her name distinctly—Margaret Ward; that was what she called herself."

The man inclined his head, and the action appeared to indicate satisfaction.

"Margaret, yes; Ward, no," he said. "You had a brother, some two years older than yourself; what has become of him?"

Etta started, and gazed eagerly in the man's face, "Who are you?" she exclaimed, in an agitated manner. "What do you know of me?"

"You had a brother," the man continued, impassively, as if he had not heard this passionate appeal, "His name was Raymond."

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know."

Again did a look of disappointment overcast the man's face.

"Is he dead?" he asked, tremulously.

"I cannot say."

"Why, what happened—how did you separate?"

"He quarreled with my aunt, and ran away from home."

"Ah! home? Where was your home?"

"In Erie."

"On the lake?"

"Yes."

"She took you there, then?"

"My aunt—yes."

"Do you remember where you lived before you went to Erie?"

Etta shook her head thoughtfully.

"No, I do not remember any place before Erie," she replied.

"Not Franklin?"

"Franklin—where is that?"

"Ah! you do not remember. Have you never heard from your brother since he ran away?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Never."

"Do you remember your parents?"

"No."

"Did not Margaret—this aunt of yours, I mean—did she never speak to you about them?"

"Very little; she appeared to dislike to do so."

"Ah! I see, she thought your father guilty; well, well, she was no worse than all the world."

"And was he not guilty?" cried Etta, eagerly.

"No, my child; he was as innocent of that dread deed as you are."

"What deed?" questioned Etta.

"Do you not know?"

"No; but from words vaguely dropped by my aunt I have been led to believe that my father, in a mad fit of jealousy, killed my mother, and then committed suicide. Is that the true story of the crime?"

He looked at her vacantly.

"Why do you ask me?" he returned.

"Because I think you know."

"Why should I?"

"Do not trifling with my feelings!" she implored, earnestly. "Your words show that you know all about me—all the dreadful story of the past. You knew my father—you were his friend—tell me my true name!"

"I cannot," he answered, sadly.

"Cannot?" she echoed, disappointedly.

"It is not yet time."

"Not time?"

"Besides, why should you wish to bear a name disgraced by crime?"

"I do not believe it!" cried Etta, passionately. "The stain is unmerited. I do not believe my father was guilty!"

The man's gray eyes glistened as he heard these words.

"Good child! good child! Ah! you are the true daughter of—" He paused abruptly.

"Who? who?" she questioned, breathlessly.

"You shall know, some day, all in good time," he answered, evasively. "I was your father's friend, I will be yours."

"That's good news!" Kate Vehslage cried, impulsively, "for if ever Etta needed a friend she does now; and your friendship is likely to be worth something, judging by the looks of your pocket-book here; it doesn't look as if an elephant had stepped on it, as mine does. What might your name be sir?" she added, curiously.

"Name?" repeated the man, absently.

"Yes, sir; you've got a name, haven't you?"

"I believe so."

Kate stared, and Doctor Hunter shrugged his shoulders.

"Singular, very!" he muttered to himself.

"Tell me your name?" urged Etta.

The man raised his right arm slowly, and pointed to the pocket-book upon the table.

"In there—a card—look," he said; and the vacant look came creeping over his face again.

Kate opened the pocket-book and made a careful inspection of its contents.

"Yes, here is a card, sure enough."

She took it out and read the inscription upon it aloud:

"SHAW & CO., BROKERS IN PETROLEUM."

The man nodded his head affirmatively, saying:

bious shake of his head; "but I am not so sure that he knows any thing about you."

"I am," replied Etta positively. "He knew me in childhood, I feel assured. Some feeling in my heart draws me irresistibly toward him; if he was my father's friend, he will be mine."

"I agree with you there, Etta," cried Kate, vivaciously. "His chimney fall is a windfall to us, and we must make the most of it. Come, doctor, I am ready to go with you for the medicine."

"Very good. You are not afraid to be left alone with this man?" he added, to Etta.

"Oh, no! he will not injure me."

"You are right—he's a gentleman, if there's any trusting to appearance—which they say there isn't—but I trust his notwithstanding."

With this somewhat contradictory statement the doctor departed, attended by Kate.

When they were gone Etta went to the chamber door and listened. She heard the deep, regular breathing of the man.

"He must be asleep," she murmured.

She went gently to the table, got the lamp, and returned to the door, pushing it open softly. She looked into the chamber, holding the lamp so that its rays would shine upon the bed.

The man lay there in a tranquil slumber. She scanned the placid features curiously. It was a fine face, with regular features, and wore a look of dignity and strength of character. The sleeping face was unlike the waking face, for the vacant look, which denoted imbecility, was gone. It was as if the man assumed a false face when awake, but lost that expression when in slumber.

"This man is not a common one," Etta told herself, as she studied the sleeping face; "and he has been a very handsome one. Something in that face appears to me familiar—these are features that I have seen in some other face. Whose?"

She taxed her brain to remember, but memory failed her here.

"It was a younger face than his," she continued. "The remembrance is far away, back in the misty past. It is not another face—it is his!" she added, as a new thought came to her mind. "I must have seen him when a child—he was younger then as well as I."

Satisfied with this solution of the puzzling memory she gently pushed the door to again, and carried the lamp back to the table.

Then taking up her work she began to sew, awaiting the return of Kate.

A quarter of an hour passed away, and then Kate came in flushed and excited.

"Phew!" she exclaimed, as she closed the door behind her.

Etta looked up from her work in surprise.

"Why, Kate, what has happened?" she asked.

"I've had a row with a scamp, but I've brought the medicine safe for all that," answered Kate, as she deposited the bottles upon the table.

"Some man has spoken to you?" said Etta.

"Yes, on Broome street, but that's nothing unusual, after dark; and it's pretty late just now."

"It is indeed. I never thought of the risk you ran."

"Risk!" ejaculated Kate; and she tossed her head disdainfully.

"Were you not frightened?"

"Not a bit! I was only mad. It was at the corner of Elizabeth street; along comes a little man, not taller than myself; I was hurrying so as to get back as quick as I could with the medicine. I hadn't the least idea that he would speak to me; we met just under the gaslight, and as I was about to pass him he grabbed me, all of a sudden by the arm."

"Did you scream?"

"Not a bit of it; I was so taken by surprise that I stood stock-still. 'Where are you going this time o' night my beauty?' says he. 'He called me a beauty, what do you think of that?'

"I think it was very impudent in him."

"That's odd, for that's just what I thought. I didn't feel a bit flattered, for I know I'm not a beauty, and I thought he was only chaffing me; and so I answered back, as gruff as could be: 'What's that to you?' But he wasn't at all put out by it. 'Don't get in a huff, my dear,' says he, still holding me by the arm—it was my left arm he had hold of—but permit me to see you home.' Then I got madder than ever. I could see his face distinctly in the gaslight, and it was a handsome face, with a long nose, and heavy black eyebrows, and a black mustache, and the long nose looked very tempting. I had one bottle in each hand, and I quickly shifted the right hand bottle into the left, and when I got my right hand free I went for him."

"Did you strike him?"

"No; I only pulled his nose—and I pulled it good and strong, and then a most astonishing thing happened. It came off!"

"The nose?"

"Yes, and squashed all up in my hand—but it was not the nose alone—his whole face came off."

"His face?"

"Yes; I tell you I was that surprised that I dropped it as if it had been red-hot. I got just one glimpse at his real face, and it was as ugly as the false one was handsome, and then he stooped down, grabbed up his false face, and went up the street like a shot."

This recital filled Etta with amazement.

"What a singular adventure!" she exclaimed.

"It just beat me, I can tell you."

"It was all a joke, I think. The man must have been to a masquerade, and was returning home. Possibly he had been drinking, and accosted you in a spirit of mischief."

"He was up to mischief, there's no mistake about that; and he didn't want his real face to be seen; but I think I shall know him if I ever see him again."

"Do you?"

"I just do!"

"But you are not likely ever to meet him again."

"Perhaps not. How's Mr. Shaw?" she added, changing the subject, abruptly.

"He's sound asleep."

"That's good. But where are we to sleep?"

"It does not much matter for the balance of the night. It's three o'clock, and it will be light in two hours or less. Suppose we finish the shirts to pass away the time?"

"With all my heart," answered Kate, taking off

her hat and shawl, and sitting down to the work. "We won't have much more of this sort of thing to do," she continued, as she threaded her needle deliberately.

"Do you think so?"

"I just do! Mr. Shaw's going to look out for us."

"Do not build your castles in the air too readily."

"I'm not building on air. He knows who you are, and there's money behind his knowledge, take my word for it."

CHAPTER XI.

ETTA'S TRUST.

ETTA stitched thoughtfully for a few moments.

"That is my impression," she said, after this slight pause; "I think this Mr. Shaw knew my family when I was an infant."

"So do I."

"And I am in hopes that he will tell me what really happened to my father and mother in the morning."

"That was the reason why you were so willing to have him stop here to-night."

"Yes."

"Do you think his name really is Shaw?"

This question surprised Etta.

"Why should it not be?" she demanded. "There's his card." She pointed to the card which lay upon the table beside the pocket-book, where Kate had left it.

"Yes, there's the card," rejoined Kate; "but how do you know that it is his card? It's a business card. Shaw & Co.—that's short for company—Brokers in petroleum. What's that?"

"This, that we are burning—kerosene."

"Oh! that's another name for it."

"Yes, before it is refined, I believe. But why should you think that this is not his card? He said his name was Shaw—Peter Shaw."

"And so it may be—I don't say it isn't, and I don't say it is; all I say is, his having the card is no proof; it's a business card, and anybody might have it."

These words made Etta again thoughtful.

"True," she answered, musingly. "But he said his name was Shaw," she persisted, "and he does not look like a man that would tell a falsehood."

"No, he certainly does not," Kate admitted. "He's as nice a looking middle-aged gent as ever I saw. But I can find out whether his name is Shaw or not."

"How can you do that?" asked Etta, surprisedly.

"I'll look in the directory to-morrow—they've got one in the corner store—and see if there is any such firm as Shaw & Co. there."

"That is not a bad idea," responded Etta, impressed by Kate's shrewdness.

"Oh! let me alone for finding out things," cried Kate, with the negligent toss of the head so peculiar to her. "If the name of the firm of Shaw & Co. is in the directory, it will tell where their office is, of course; and if our chimney friend goes away without satisfying our curiosity, I'll walk down to the office of Shaw & Co. some fine morning and ask to see Mr. Peter Shaw, and then I can tell whether he's Peter Shaw or not."

After this they sewed in silence for a few moments; but Kate's eyes kept wandering from her work to the pocket-book on the table. It had a plump look that fascinated her.

"I wonder how much money there is in it?" she exclaimed, suddenly, giving expression to the thought that was in her mind.

"Why don't you count it, and see?" rejoined Etta, laughingly.

Kate speedily availed herself of the permission thus accorded, for she would not have laid a finger upon the pocket-book, notwithstanding her curiosity, if Etta had made the slightest objection. She took out the bank-notes and began to count them.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed. "Why, Etta, here's a hundred-dollar bill! and here's another, and a fifty! half a dozen fifties! and a twenty! lots of twenties, and ever so many tens! Oh! it's just a heap of money. Oh! don't I wish it was all mine!"

"You mustn't be covetous, Kate. Remember the commandment."

"Oh, yes! that's all very well; but when I see all this money, and know how much good it would do me, how can I help wishing that it was mine?"

"Is there so very much of it?"

"Five hundred dollars!" answered Kate, breathlessly. "Oh! Mr. Peter Shaw is a rich man!"

"It would appear so; and, somehow, I can't help thinking that my father was well off."

"I'm sure he was! You're a born lady, Etta; any one can see that with half an eye. Look at your face, and your small ears, and your little hands, with the dainty fingers!"

Etta laughed.

"Are those the signs of my ladyship, Kate?" she cried.

"La, yes! look at my hands." Kate extended a large hand, hardened by toil, as she spoke. "See the difference between us! Why, there's as much difference in men and women as there is in horses. The cartman's horse doesn't look much like the glossy horse that your fine gentleman drives in Central Park."

"Whether I was born a lady or not, is a thought that never troubled me," replied Etta; "but, I am free to confess that I would gladly discover where I came from, and who I belong to, if I could, and escape from this life of poverty and unremitting toil."

"And that's just what we are going to do," answered Kate. "See! daylight is coming—and there's the last stitch in my shirt, and I'm not sorry. I have an idea that this morning is to be the turning-point in our lives, and that better and brighter days are in store for us."

"Heaven grant it may be so!" rejoined Etta, fervently.

"Then finish up, and I'll fix the stove and fire-board. It's a wonder that they were not smashed all to pieces. We don't want any fire built until it's time to get breakfast."

Kate repaired the damage done by the man in his fall in a temporary manner, refraining from driving any nails, as she did not wish to awaken the man from his slumber.

"Doctor Hunter said the longer he slept the better he would feel when he woke up," she told Etta.

"And when he awakes you are to give him the tonic and bathe his head with the liniment, and he'll look in, in the course of the morning, to see how he's getting on."

When Etta had finished, Kate did up their work in a neat parcel, and carried it away just as the clock was striking five.

Etta leaned back in her chair and gave herself up to meditation; but the fair head soon drooped, the lids closed over the weary eyes, and she fell asleep.

She dozed in this manner for an hour, when a voice sounded in her ears and partly aroused her.

"Etta! Etta!"

This word came to her like a memory of her childhood. Who was it that was calling her so familiarly by name?"

"Etta! Etta!"

Again came the voice, and louder than before. She started up, and rubbed her eyes drowsily.

"Who calls?" she cried.

"Here—Etta!"

It was Peter Shaw calling upon her from the other room.

She went to the door and pushed it wide open so as to let all the light she could into the darkened room.

"Are you there?" he asked.

"Yes; you called me?"

"Several times. Were you asleep?"

"Yes; in my chair."

"Poor girl! I fear I have deprived you of a night's rest."

"It does not matter. Do you feel any better, sir, this morning?"

"Yes; but not so well as I could wish. My head pains me, and my ideas are sadly confused, and I feel sore in every limb."

"That is no wonder, sir, considering the fall you had. It seems a marvel that you were not killed."

"Men do not die until their life's task is accomplished," answered Peter Shaw, with a strange gravity; "and my work is not yet finished—much more remains to do. Heaven has its own way in bringing events to pass, and we are but passive instruments in its hands."

He broke off from the moralizing strain to ask, abruptly: "Is your friend here?"

"Kate? no; she has gone with the work."

"Good! She is too curious. I have something that I wish to say to you alone."

Etta's heart gave a sudden bound.

"Ah! you will tell me. I knew you would!" she cried, joyfully.

This outburst appeared to surprise him somewhat.

"About what?" he asked.

"My father!"

"Ah! Do you not know that he is dead?"

"I have been told so—that he died when I was a child; my mother, also."

"Who told you so?"

"My aunt."

"Ah! Margaret Aylward?"

"No, Ward!"

He continued, without heeding the correction: "Margaret Aylward never liked your father, for he passed her by to wed her younger sister. It was a slight she never forgave, and she was none the less bitter against him because it was unintentional. She was ready enough to side with the world against him, and she brought his children up in ignorance of their father's name."

shoulders eased my descent. Is there not a lump upon my head?"

"Yes, a terrible one. Here it is."

He winced again.

"Ah! it is sensitive. That's where the villain struck me."

A new light flashed upon Etta's mind.

"Heavens!" she murmured. "This, then, was an attempt to murder you?"

"It was. The villains thought they had succeeded, and thrust me down the chimney to hide the evidence of their crime." He raised himself suddenly up and grasped her wrist, continuing, forcibly: "But not a word of this—not to the doctor—not to your girl-friend—they must believe that I am dead—that they have succeeded—thus only can I defeat their machinations; for they are banded together, a gang of desperate and remorseless men, who would not stop at any crime to effect their purposes; and he, my old enemy, is at their head, their chief and leader!"

"Oh! I will save you!" cried Etta, impulsively. "You can remain here; they will never dream that you are here."

He sunk back upon the pillow, nodding his head approvingly.

"The very thing," he replied. "I would remain here concealed; a week will answer. In that time the villains will develop their plan, and I shall be able to defeat it. Are there not some apartments vacant in this house?"

"Yes, the adjoining ones—that door leads to them; there are two like these, but much more pleasant, for their windows look out upon the street."

"Nothing could be better! You shall take them for me. Some furniture can be obtained, I suppose—anything will do."

"Kate can arrange that—she knows more about such things than I do; but—"

"Well, why do you pause?"

"We have no money," faltered Etta, blushing painfully as she made this admission.

His hand sought his pocket at once.

"Ha! and my pocket-book is gone!" he cried. "That's awkward!"

"Oh! we have it, sir; we found it in the fireplace."

"There, did I not say Providence watched over us? I wonder the villains did not pick my pocket, but they were after larger game than that. How much was there in it?"

This question was put absently, as if he was trying to recollect the amount, and Etta's prompt reply, "Five hundred dollars, sir," quite surprised him.

"Why, how do you know?" he cried.

"Kate counted it, sir."

He laughed pleasantly, crying;

"Ah! didn't I say she was sharp?"

"But she is an honest girl, sir," answered Etta. "It's all there, just as we found it; and I have your watch also."

He laughed again.

"I fell into good hands," he said. "Well, well, you shall be my cashier, and use as much of the money as you think proper."

"I'll get you some breakfast as soon as Kate comes."

"Very good; and arrange with her about securing these other rooms for me."

"I will. There she comes now."

"Remember! not a word of the murderous attack upon my life. A woman's tongue is an unruly member."

"And yet you trust me."

"Ah! yes—that is because—"

"You know who I am?" she replied, quickly.

"Yes."

"Why will you not tell me?"

"Because, my child, your safety lies in your present ignorance. I do not wish to involve you in the dangers that encompass me."

"These enemies who pursue you were my father's enemies?"

"Yes; and our cause is a common one against them. I would shield you from their deadly hate. If they knew you were living they would destroy you. Ah! you do not know the golden bait that lures them on; but you shall—you shall, all in good time. Let me get back my strength again, and then I shall be ready for them."

"Etta," called Kate, from the other room.

"Your friend is calling, go to her."

Etta left him, reluctantly.

CHAPTER XII.

GLACKMEYER'S PROPOSAL.

"WELL, how is he?" asked Kate, as Etta joined her.

"Much better."

"Ah! does he appear at all loony this morning?" Etta smiled at the question.

"By no means," she answered; and then proceeded to tell Kate of the arrangement Peter Shaw wished to make about the adjoining rooms.

"Well, of all the rigs!" exclaimed Kate. "I think that Doctor Hunter was right, and that the old gent is cracked, after all; but the way he came down that chimney was enough to crack anybody's head. What do you suppose he wants to stay here for—why don't he go home? He must have a home somewhere to go to."

"He has his own motives for this course," replied Etta, evasively.

"Haven't you any idea of them?" persisted Kate.

"Have you?" returned Etta, as before.

Kate shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"Well, I just have," she answered.

"You have?" cried Etta, surprisedly.

"It's another case!"

Etta's surprise increased.

"Another case?" she asked, perplexedly.

"Yes; don't you see it?"

"I confess I do not."

"He's smitten!"

"Smitten?"

"Yes, with you. Oh! that pretty face of yours has got a great deal to answer for."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Etta, incredulously.

"There's no nonsense about it!" insisted Kate, in her blunt way.

"Why, he's old enough to be my father."

"I don't care if he was old enough to be your grandfather! It's a clear case. He's taken a shine

to you—love at first sight—and so he wants to be near you."

"Absurd!"

Etta smiled, thinking how soon she could drive this ridiculous notion from Kate's brain if Peter Shaw had not placed the seal of secrecy upon her lips.

"Why is it?" rejoined Kate. "Why shouldn't he fall in love with you as well as Mr. Glackmeyer? He isn't any older, and he's a great deal better-looking."

"He's a fine-looking man," said Etta, musingly; "and it appears to me as if I had somewhere seen his face before."

"Where?" cried Kate, curiously.

Etta shook her head.

"I cannot tell you," she replied. "I think it must have been in my dreams, for I cannot remember the time nor place now; only there seems a familiar look upon his features to me."

"You must have seen him when you were a child; you know he said he was your father's friend?"

"Yes, I suppose that is it; but it is useless to study over it; time will reveal the truth, and make that light which now appears so dark. I must have patience and wait, he said so; and I will—I will. Now we must try and fix the other rooms for him."

"Oh! that we can do in a jiffy! There's only one thing wanting."

"What is that?"

"Money."

"Oh! we shall not want for that; Mr. Shaw has placed his pocket-book at my disposal."

Etta took the pocket-book from the bosom of her dress as she spoke.

"My! Did he tell you that you might spend what you liked of it?"

"He did."

"Our rent's got to be paid, I suppose you know, before I can take the other rooms?"

"Certainly; I spoke to him about that."

"Oh, Godfrey! won't old Glackmeyer be astonished when he sees the money! He'll wonder where it came from."

This remark made Etta thoughtful.

"True, we were so poor," she rejoined, musingly.

"What will you tell him?"

"Tell him you've found a rich uncle."

Etta shook her head objectingly.

"No, Kate, I would rather that you should not do that," she returned.

"Well, then, I'll tell him he's my uncle; have you any objections to that?"

"Why represent him as a relative at all?"

Kate shrugged her shoulders in her expressive way, exclaiming:

"Oh! my dear, you are entirely too innocent for this world."

Etta looked surprised.

"In what way?" she questioned.

"Why, don't you see, we must make Mr. Shaw some kind of a relation to keep people from talking about us. Our good name is about all we have left, and we must hold on to it."

"I see; I did not think of that—you are right, Kate; and, I have an idea, Mr. Shaw will not have any objection. He desires to live here in seclusion because he fears—"

Etta paused abruptly, remembering Peter Shaw's caution. Kate's keen ears were pricked up curiously.

"Fears what?" she cried, eagerly.

"I cannot tell you."

Kate's face expressed an intense disappointment. "Oh, I thought I was going to find out something," she exclaimed. "I thought he had been telling you something about himself. Hasn't he?"

"He has said a great many things," replied Etta, seeing that Kate's curiosity must be appeased in some way; "but he talks so strangely that I cannot tell what dependence to place upon his words. You know Doctor Hunter thought him insane."

"But you don't!" cried Kate. "I know that."

"Well, no, not insane—that is to say, not mad, not crazy, and violent, or dangerous, and yet not exactly in his right mind, as if his brain had been injured by his fall—his head is very badly bruised."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"And he has a kind of a mania that enemies are in pursuit of him."

"I see, and that led him out on the roof, and down the chimney! I understand it all now. He's an eccentric gent—what they call a *son omnibus*."

"Somnambulist, you mean."

"Yes; I never could get that word right."

Kate's jumping so quickly at this conclusion saved Etta from all further explanation.

"And now let us see about the furnishing of the other rooms," she said. "How much money will you require?"

"Well, there's our rent, that's ten-fifty, and the rent of the front rooms twelve; that's twenty-two dollars and fifty cents; and then what things I want will cost about fifty more—I can get a misfit carpet, all made, and every thing else I want at Kelly's—he won't need a stove in there this time of year."

"Oh, no. It is only for a short time, and I would not spend a dollar more than I could help," suggested Etta.

"I never do; you ought to know that by this time; and I'll be just as careful with his money as I am with my own. I think you had better let me have seventy-five dollars in all, and I can bring you back the change."

Etta counted out the seventy-five dollars for her. "There it is," she said. "Order the things right away, and we will try to get the rooms fixed before dark."

"Oh! we can do that easily. I'll get Mrs. Williams, up-stairs, to scrub them as soon as I get the keys—she can do that while I'm buying the things."

Kate put on her hat and shawl, took the money, and hurried away.

It does not take long to furnish apartments, in a small way, in New York, particularly when one has the ready cash in hand, and by six o'clock that evening Peter Shaw was installed in his new home.

He sat in a rocking-chair by the window, and opened the evening paper that Kate had purchased for him.

The eagerness with which he unfolded it appeared to indicate that he expected to find some item of interest in it. And he did. This item was an advertisement couched in the following terms:

"MISSING.—Peter Shaw, of the firm of Shaw & Co., Brokers in Petroleum. He is of eccentric habits, and has the peculiarity of not remembering his own name. Any information concerning him will be liberally paid for at the office, 706 William St.

"CHESTER STARKE."

Peter Shaw smiled as he perused this advertisement. He was alone, the girls being in the other apartment getting his tea ready for him, and so he could express his thoughts freely, and he uttered them aloud as men often do.

"Poor Starke! he must be terribly exercised about me," so they ran. "And when he communicates with Ossian and Almira, what will they think? Ah! true and trusted friends, I must keep you in suspense for a while. I have found the clew to this tangled skein of the past, and I must follow it to the unraveling. By the aid of Providence—for which all thanks—I have made wonderful discoveries. Henrietta is found, and must be guarded with a jealous care; but Raymond, where is he, poor boy? Is he still alive, and upon which part of this broad earth does he wander? I think he lives. Heaven, which has protected her, would not desert him, surely! What was Margaret's motive for this cruel deception? A mistaken sense of shame—she would save the child from inheriting the father's disgrace. Well, well, she is in a better world than this now, and her eyes, cleared from the gloss of prejudice, see the truth and know who was the guilty one."

He was silent for a few moments, and a frown gathered upon his broad forehead.

"He lives also!" he resumed; "lives to work more evil. How cunningly he trapped me into his power, and what desperate creatures he has at his beck and nod. But that's not to be wondered at—men will do almost any thing for gold, and the stake for which he plays is a princely one. I cannot be too cautious in proceeding against him. Last night's work shows how unscrupulous and remorseless he can be. And I have a stronger motive now for caution; life no longer seems a dreary desert unblessed by hope. I have been reckless of existence; many a time I have thought I would gladly lay the weary burden down, and seek that rest which death alone could give. But now I will brace every nerve for the desperate struggle that lies before me. I will be as pitiless as these scoundrels have shown themselves to be, and bring every one of this secret order of False Faces to a sure and speedy punishment!"

Had Doctor Hunter been permitted to see the expression of Peter Shaw's face as he pronounced these words he would no longer have had any doubt of his sanity.

A summons from Etta to come to tea put an end to his musings.

He was obliged to lean upon her shoulder for support, for his head was still giddy, and his steps uncertain, when he attempted to walk.

"Ah! I am weak yet," he murmured, as the girls placed him in a chair by the table. "It will take some days to get my strength back."

"And no wonder, after such a shaking up as you had!" said Kate, as she poured him out a cup of tea; "or a shaking down, I should say. I wouldn't advise you to try and get down any more chimneys in that way."

He laughed, and answered:

"I do not intend to, if I can help it. I was not a free agent in that transaction."

"No; you don't look like a man who follows

"I?" stammered Etta, quite startled.

Mr. Glackmeyer rose up as if he had been propelled by springs.

"I want a wife!" he exclaimed, gaspingly.

Then what Kate had said flashed through Etta's mind, and she responded, roguishly:

"Well, why don't you get one?"

"I will—you take me?"

"No, excuse me, I really must decline—but I think Kate will take you."

Mr. Glackmeyer made a grimace.

"No, you—not fraulein Kate."

Etta shook her head, preserving her gravity by a strong effort.

"Ach! no matter—you know yourself how it is!" and Mr. Glackmeyer retired confusedly.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BARTYNE WELLS.

The course of this narrative takes us back again to French Creek, and the house of the midnight tragedy; but that house, and the grounds surrounding it, have greatly changed since that night of violence and crime. Indeed the whole face of the country around is changed. Where formerly but a few houses were scattered about, private residences, a busy, bustling town has sprung up.

Petroleum is the agent that has worked this change. Barren lands have suddenly become mines of wealth. Wells have been sunk in all directions and oil has been discovered plentifully.

Two of the best and most profitable wells, yielding the steadiest flow, are in the Bartyne property. The once pretty mansion is now a manufactory, and sheds, and machinery, and oil casks litter up the grounds, and scores of workingmen are engaged upon the premises.

There is a sign upon the house, bearing, in black letters upon a white ground, this inscription: "BARTYNE WELLS." The front parlor has been turned into an office, with a sign to that effect on the door, and here the superintendent transacts the business of the works, which are carried on in the firm name of PETER SHAW & CO.

This superintendent sits in an easy-chair before his desk—a gaunt man, with red hair, a freckled face, the sharp features of that face denoting shrewdness and energy. His red hair is cut short and bristles up over his forehead somewhat aggressively.

He is carelessly attired, evidently caring little for his personal appearance, and looking like a man inclined to take the world easily. The day being warm he has turned back his shirt-collar, divested himself of his vest, and wears a loose linen sack. This sack, once buff, has dark spots of a deeper shade upon it—oil stains, probably, for there is an oily flavor in the air; it pervades the building, and surrounds the man himself. When he smiles he does so in an oily manner.

Why should he not? for Ossian Plummer is well satisfied with his present lot, and his prospects for the future. When the humble raftsmen floated down the Alleghany on his load of lumber he little dreamed what was in store for him. When he passed the mouth of French Creek he could not foresee the coming day that was to find him installed upon its bank as superintendent of the Bartyne oil wells.

That he filled that position well the rich yield of oil fully testified; and that he bore the change in his condition with becoming moderation, the outspoken praise of the workingmen under his charge made manifest.

It was a slack hour in the day, and Ossian leaned back in his chair, with his eyes half closed, in a dreamy state of content. His listlessness was disturbed by the sound of footsteps coming up the walk. He opened his eyes widely and saw two men coming toward the office. As both the door and the window were open, on account of the weather, he had a good look at them as they drew near.

One was a tall, slender man, well dressed, with a handsome, haughty face, black hair and eyes, and a drooping black mustache. His companion was much shorter, dapper in figure, with a fair complexion, sandy hair, and light whiskers, which started from his ears and met beneath his nose. These being quite bushy made his head bear a strong resemblance to a Scotch terrier.

He wore a tweed suit, and a high-crowned, narrow-brimmed black straw hat.

The contrast between these two personages was quite marked. The one walked with the haughty stride of a man who thinks he is of some consequence in the world, and the other trotted beside him, something after the manner of a faithful and favorite dog.

"Hello! here's somebody that's never been here before," commented Ossian, after his survey of them. "More orders for ile, I reckon; and I can't begin to ship it fast enough."

He arose to receive them as they entered the office.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said; for Ossian rather prided himself upon his politeness. "What can I do for you?"

The taller of the two sank into a chair, but as he did so his black eyes, which were deeply set in his head, glanced furtively around the apartment, and his frame quivered with a perceptible shiver.

"Thank you," he said, removing his hat, and applying a daintily-scented white handkerchief to his face. "It's a warm day!"

These words were a strange contradiction to the emotion he had evinced but the moment before; but Ossian did not observe this contradiction, and answered to the words:

"Tarnal warm—there's no mistake about that."

The little man remained standing, and cleared his throat with a preliminary cough.

"Ahem!" he began. "You are the superintendent of these works, I believe?"

"Zactly, just so," replied Ossian.

"Plummer, by name?"

"Plummer it is—Ossian Plummer. Have you come for oil?"

The little man smirked.

"Well, in one sense we have," he made answer. "Our business here is of the greatest importance—the greatest importance." Repeating the words impressively.

"Is it?" responded Ossian, in a negligent manner. "Speculators, come to buy out the wells," he told

himself. "It can't be done." Ossian rubbed his palms together as if he was lubricating some oil between them. "We ain't selling out just now."

But his impassive, freckled face gave no indication of the thoughts that were passing in his mind. "Permit me to introduce ourselves," continued the little man. He waved his hand in a consequential manner toward his companion, continuing: "This is Mr. Edgar Skelmersdale." Mr. Skelmersdale inclined his head graciously, but he could not divest himself of a certain degree of hauteur, that impressed Ossian Plummer unpleasantly.

"Perhaps you have heard of him?"

"No, I can't say I ever did," rejoined Ossian; staring at Mr. Edgar Skelmersdale in such a way as to rather put him out of countenance.

"My name is Cebra Selkreg, and I'm in the law," continued the little man, laying quite an emphasis upon the word "law."

"Be you?" responded Ossian, as if this fact had not made any particular impression upon his mind. "That's an odd name of yours. Zebra, did you say?"

"No, no, Cebra—C, not Z; Cebra. Don't confound me with that striped animal which we sometimes see exhibited in a menagerie."

Ossian smiled in his grim fashion.

"Yes, I know what you mean," he replied; "that's a cross between a horse and a jackass. Well, Mr. See-bra, what can I do for you?"

"We have come to take possession," responded Mr. Cebra Selkreg, suavely.

Ossian looked as if he did not understand him.

"To take possession?" he repeated, in an inquiring manner.

"Exactly; of these oil wells."

"Show!" ejaculated Ossian.

Mr. Selkreg waved his hand toward Mr. Edgar Skelmersdale, saying:

"My client here, Mr. Skelmersdale, has purchased this property."

"Has he?" asked Ossian, dubiously; and he looked askance at both the lawyer and his client.

Cebra Selkreg took a folded document from his pocket.

"Here is the deed of sale—the conveyance," he said. "Look at it; you must be acquainted with Genni Bartyne's signature."

Ossian examined the document and a bewildered expression came over his features.

"I don't know much about his signature," he muttered, half aloud, and half to himself; "but it don't appear to me that he would sell this property just now; leastways, not without consulting me."

"If you are at all familiar with legal documents, you will perceive that this conveyance is properly drawn and executed," said Cebra Selkreg, with great suavity. "Mr. Bartyne may have had reasons for disposing of this property unknown to you. At all events, Mr. Edgar Skelmersdale has become its purchaser, and we have come to take possession by due process of law. But the change of proprietor will make no difference in your *status* here; we shall be happy to retain you in your position as superintendent, with whatever salary or emolument you are now receiving," continued the little lawyer, artfully.

Ossian scratched his head perplexedly.

"I'm a *leetle* more than superintendent here," he replied; "and, gentlemen, not to make too many words about it, I'm rayther of the opinyun that the conveyance, as you call it, ain't worth the paper it's writ on."

Selkreg and Skelmersdale exchanged glances; they were not pleased at this remark of Ossian's; that was evident.

But Selkreg did not lose his suavity; it is a difficult thing to disturb a lawyer's serenity. He spread the document out before Ossian, and placed his forefinger upon it impressively.

"I have only to call your attention to the signatures of these witnesses, all reputable citizens of New York. The deed is properly attested, and has been duly recorded in Franklin, the county seat."

"That may all be," replied Ossian, "but when was that document signed?"

This question appeared to take both Skelmersdale and Selkreg by surprise, though it was one they might have expected. Selkreg hesitated and glanced at his principal, receiving in return a look that cautioned circumspection in the answer. Selkreg elevated his little tufted eyebrows with a slight twitch of the muscles, as if to intimate that he knew what he was about, and then demanded of Ossian, as suavely as ever:

"Why do you ask?"

"Because," answered Ossian, with a dry chuckle, "I want to know."

"Certainly; of course; there is no reason why you should not. By reference to this document, then, you will perceive that it was signed on the thirteenth day of August last."

"Just one week ago."

"Precisely."

"I did perceive that, and that's what puzzled me."

Both Edgar Skelmersdale and Cebra Selkreg looked uneasy. Ossian Plummer had been represented to them as an illiterate Yankee, honest and faithful, but not gifted with a more than ordinary intelligence. It now occurred forcibly to their minds that he was shrewder than he had been given credit for, and that he was not disposed to accept their deed of conveyance as readily as they had supposed.

"Why so?" inquired the Celtic lawyer, cautiously.

Ossian lolled back in his chair negligently.

"Because Mr. Genni Bartyne disappeared, about thirteen years ago, and I don't think he was ever heard of afterward."

"Then how happens it that you have been running these wells, in his interest, for the last five years?" returned Selkreg, quickly.

"I'm running these wells in my own interest," replied Ossian, with his grim smile—"in the interest of Peter Shaw and Co.—and I'm one of the Co.—and we hold a deed to these wells."

"From Genni Bartyne?"

"Just so."

"How can that be, when, as you say, Genni Bartyne disappeared thirteen years ago?" cried Selkreg, with the exultation of a lawyer who has detected a witness in a contradiction. "These wells were not discovered until the oil fever broke out here, and that's less than ten years ago, to my certain knowl-

edge. If you hold any deed of this property it must have been given since the disappearance of Genni Bartyne."

"Do you think so?" answered Ossian, in what might be considered a non-committal manner.

"Tush!" cried Edgar Skelmersdale, impatiently, speaking for the first time in the matter. "Why discuss that question? We know, as well as you do, that Peter Shaw and Genni Bartyne are one and the same person. But I can tell you something that you do not know. Peter Shaw disappeared from New York as mysteriously as Genni Bartyne disappeared from here; but this second disappearance is more effectual than the first; he will never be heard of again."

Ossian's lower jaw dropped.

"Disappeared?" he muttered, uneasily.

"Yes," replied Selkreg; "after signing this deed, and receiving the large amount of money paid for the property, he was suddenly missed."

"Missed?" repeated Ossian.

"Yes; we fear the possession of this large sum of money caused some of the desperate characters who infest New York to waylay, rob and murder him."

"Waylaid, robbed and murdered!" muttered Ossian, shaking his head in a troubled manner. "I was afraid something would happen to him in New York—but what was Chester about?"

These words were uttered so indistinctly as to be unintelligible to Skelmersdale and his confederate, but they exchanged triumphant glances as they noticed the troubled expression of Ossian's face. They felt confident of success in their bold scheme.

"I trust you will not put my client to any unnecessary trouble in gaining possession of this property?" began Selkreg, suavely. "As I said before, the change of proprietorship will not make any difference in your position here—"

"We hain't come to the change yet," interrupted Ossian, abruptly; "and we ain't likely to."

"Then we shall have recourse to the law!" cried Selkreg, dropping his suave tone for a bullying one.

"You can have recourse to what you like," replied Ossian, composedly. "I hold this property in trust for the children of Genni Bartyne, and my deed goes away ahead of yours."

"Tricked!" exclaimed Edgar Skelmersdale, springing angrily to his feet.

"Non-suited!" muttered Selkreg. "Here's a flaw in the indictment. It appears then that my client has been cheated out of his money—that the sale was a fraudulent one!"

"Well, if he paid in any money on this transaction," drawled Ossian, "he ought to have taken a photograph of it."

"Why so?"

"Because he'll never see it again."

Selkreg forced a laugh, but it did not sound exhilarating.

"You are facetious, Mr. Plummer," he rejoined. "But this is a serious business, and, I am sorry to say, we shall be obliged to proceed against the estate of Genni Bartyne."

"How can you when he disposed of every thing he had before he died?" inquired Ossian, dryly.

Something like an oath escaped from Cebra Selkreg's lips.

"We're regularly jewed!" he cried. "Come, Mr. Skelmersdale, we need not remain here, for, if I understand aright, Mr. Plummer intends to dispute our claim to this property."

"I don't want to hurt your feelings," replied Ossian, "but I shall just hold on here as long as there's any hold on left to me. If you want to try the law, you're welcome, but I don't think you will. I hold this property for Raymond and Henrietta Bartyne, children of Genni Bartyne, and if he's dead, it's theirs. Good-day, gentlemen; sorry you came all the way from New York on such a fool's errand."

"We must appeal to the law!" cried Selkreg, as he and Skelmersdale withdrew from the office, while something suspiciously like a chuckle broke from Ossian's lips.

CHAPTER XIV.

VILLAINY AT FAULT.

As Edgar Skelmersdale and Cebra Selkreg walked down the road toward the railroad depot, they conversed freely over their defeated scheme.

"That Yankee is not such a fool as he looks," said Skelmersdale.

"By no means. Here's all our trouble for nothing."

"Is there no trick of law by which we could gain possession of the estate?"

"None; a prior deed just stops us short; there's no getting over it."

"Then we have killed Genni Bartyne for nothing?"

"Yes—unless—"

"What?" asked Skelmersdale, quickly, as the other hesitated.

"Where are these children that he spoke of?" asked Selkreg, thoughtfully.

"I do not know."

"Did you ever hear of them before?"</p

philosophically. "In all games of chance you can never tell what cards your opponent holds until he shows his hand. If this superintendent has told us the truth—and I see no reason to doubt it—Genni Bartyne appears to have guarded the property against such a scheme as we laid for it. It's provoking, after all our trouble, but we can't help it."

Edgar Skelmersdale shook his head dissentingly.

"I think you are mistaken there," he rejoined.

"In not being able to help it?"

"No, no, I don't mean that; I mean in Bartyne taking any precaution against us—or against me, rather, I should say, for he knows nothing about you, and he could not possibly be aware of my existence. I was away from this section years after that night's work. I had as good cause to disappear as he had."

"I have no doubt of it," exclaimed Selkreg, with a significant smile.

"Being charged with the murder of his wife, Bartyne took the step that would naturally suggest itself to any man, to secure the property to his children in case any accident should happen to him."

Selkreg reflected over this, but he did not agree with his companion.

"It may be so," he returned; "but he was not in any particular danger."

"Was he not?" cried Skelmersdale. "If you had been there that night you would have thought he was. Genni Bartyne had a very narrow escape from being lynched."

"Ah! that, of course, I could not have known. He might have been in danger from Judge Lynch, but no other judge would have condemned him."

"No?" cried Skelmersdale, surprisedly.

"Of course not. I know the law—that's my business. This charge of killing his wife was a very vague one."

"Vague one! Why, he was found beside her dead body, with the bloody knife in his hand."

"Was it ever proved that the knife was his?"

"There was no chance for proof, as there was no trial; haven't I told you that before?" cried Skelmersdale, impatiently. Bartyne rushed away like a madman!"

Selkreg nodded his head sagaciously.

"There it is—emotional insanity—any jury would have acquitted him on that plea," he replied. "Besides, if my memory serves me right, and it is not apt to play tricks with me, did you not tell me the body of the wife was never found?"

"It never was."

"You can't prove a murder without a dead body; for all any one knows to the contrary, Mrs. Bartyne may be still alive."

Edgar Skelmersdale started violently at these words.

"Jane Bartyne alive!" he exclaimed. "Oh, would to heaven that she was! I would give all I possess in the world, all I ever hope to possess—yes, more! I would forfeit my eternal soul to see her standing, living, before me!"

Selkreg shrugged his shoulders compassionately at this display of emotion.

"Ah! you loved this woman?" he responded.

"Better than my life!"

"And she preferred somebody else?"

"Yes; I could not gain her love," answered Skelmersdale, gloomily.

"And Genni Bartyne did. Now I know why you hated him. Well, you are even with him on that score. The woman and the man both being out of the way—for I do not think she is alive, that is a probability I am not prepared to admit—let's look after this little estate, which the oil wells have made so valuable. Who is this Plummer, the superintendent?"

"I do not know."

"You have no idea where Genni Bartyne found him, or how he came to put such trust in him?"

"Not the slightest; but I think that trust is well deserved, don't you?"

"Decidedly. He's a Yankee, and as sharp as that *genus homo* generally is. He'll give us trouble, but the property is worth it. We may prove too smart for him in the long run, however."

"Do you think you can beat him?" asked Skelmersdale, hopefully.

"I intend to try. We've got the secret order at our back, and we must not hesitate at any measures, however desperate."

"We will not!" exclaimed Skelmersdale, determinedly. "This property would make us rich for life. Our gains now are precarious, and we are hourly in danger of being apprehended. One traitor in our band would bring sure destruction upon our heads."

"There is little danger of one of the order peaching, but there's the risk, as you say, and it's rather an uncomfortable feeling to live under. My views entirely coincide with yours. I wish to obtain sufficient money so that I can live virtuously for the remainder of my life, and be happy. The moment that you suggested the oil-well speculation to me it struck me as one worth trying, and promising a rich return. That we have failed in our first attempt must not be considered a circumstance so discouraging as to deter us from making a second, third, or even a fourth venture. *Nu Desperandum!*—which, reduced to our vulgar vernacular, means, never despair!"

"I am ready to submit to your guidance," answered Skelmersdale.

Selkreg chuckled pleasantly.

"Ah! you have found my advice of service before now," he cried. "There's nothing like the law for sharpening a man's wits."

"Or prompting a man to mischief," added Skelmersdale, dryly.

"Just so. We lawyers keep the ball moving. What would the world be without us? *Ecce Signum!* Enough on that head. Self-laudation is not one of my foibles. Now to business; let's review the field of operations and see how we stand. The father being *non est*, the children become heirs to the property. They must be found and disposed of."

"You would not kill them?"

"One I might, the boy, if I cannot persuade him to sign away his claim," replied Selkreg.

"And the girl?"

"I reserve her for a happier destiny."

"A happier destiny?"

"Yes; don't you see? You wear remarkably well, Skelmersdale, and no one could guess within

ten years of your true age. Why shouldn't you fascinate the female heiress, and make her Mrs. Edgar Skelmersdale, eh?"

Edgar Skelmersdale smiled at these words.

"Well, that is an ideal!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and a very good one, too, I flatter myself. You're still a handsome man; don't you think it worth trying?"

"Perhaps," answered Skelmersdale, thoughtfully. "But the daughter's heart may prove as hard to win as the mother's. What then?"

"We must arrange it so as to leave her little choice in the matter," replied Selkreg, with a significant laugh. "The first thing to be done is to find out where she is."

"It appears to me that there will be some difficulty in that."

"Why so?"

"She is not with her father, that is evident, or we should know something about it. You may remember that he had rooms at Leggett's Hotel on Chat-ham street, with that young man who runs the office for him in New York?"

Selkreg became thoughtful.

"True," he rejoined. "But then he must know where she is. He might have her at some boarding-school, without our knowing anything about it."

"He might."

"How old is she—have you any idea?"

"Somewhere near eighteen, I think, but I am not positive as to her exact age."

"Quite a young lady! And her brother, is he younger or older?"

"Older."

"How much?"

"Two or three years."

"Why then he must be a man grown."

"Yes; if he is alive."

"Don't you think he is?"

"I don't know what to think. I have never taken the matter of these two children into consideration until now, and I confess I am puzzled to account for them; who had the care of them during their father's long absence, whether they are still living, or where they are."

"Those are precisely the points upon which we must satisfy ourselves, for those children stand between you and a princely fortune. In the first place, did this Genni Bartyne have any relations?"

"None that I ever heard of. He was from the Eastern country, and came out this way as agent for some manufacturing company. He located himself at Franklin; there he made the acquaintance of Jane Aylward and married her. He bought that tract of land by the creek, and had the house built during the courtship, and it was finished by the wedding-day, and ready for occupation."

"Had the wife any relatives?"

"Only one at the time of her death, an elder sister named Margaret."

"Where did she live then?"

"In Franklin."

"Is she living there now?"

"I do not know."

"That is the first point to be ascertained, then, I have an idea that she brought up the children."

They had reached the depot by this time, but as they found they would have to wait half an hour for the train east, they walked up and down the platform, continuing their conversation. They had this platform to themselves, no other passengers being in waiting for the train.

"I think you are right, Selkreg," said Skelmersdale; "for I remember that the children were on a visit to this Margaret Aylward on that night." There was always a hesitancy in Skelmersdale's speech when alluding to that tragedy of the past, as if his conscience was tender over his share in it.

"Ah! they were, eh?" cried Selkreg, briskly.

"The sisters were on good terms?"

"Yes; but I have heard a singular story about Margaret."

"Eh, what?" exclaimed Selkreg, pricking up his ears, lawyer-fashion, in hopes of some evidence to bear upon his case. "Touching her character, eh?"

"Oh, no. This was one of those romantic affairs that we read of, but seldom meet. It seems that she was in love with Genni Bartyne, but as she was some five or six years older, and by no means as good-looking as her sister, he, very naturally, gave Jane the preference. Margaret never forgave Genni Bartyne for this slight, but, strangely enough, Genni and Jane never suspected Margaret's misplaced affection. Though it was plain to many eyes, they never discovered it. Happy in each other's affection, they had no thought of the great disappointment that brooded in Margaret's heart."

"Of course she wouldn't be fool enough to tell them?" cried Selkreg. "This little romantic episode makes things plainer. Don't you see? This Margaret, loving the father, would be inclined to be fond of the children for his sake. She must have brought them up—perhaps they are in Franklin with her at this very moment."

"Then why has not the father claimed them?"

"How do we know that he does not visit them there? He may not claim them openly, on account of this scandal of the past. He may not even have acknowledged himself to be their father—or, if he has, it is under an assumed name, so as to save them from the stigma of disgrace attached to his."

"You think then that these children have been brought up under some other name?"

"That is my impression—Aylward, for instance; and if they have, that makes our game all the safer."

"How so?"

"They will not know now—unless they have been told, and I don't think they have—that they are the heirs to any property—"

"You are wrong there, Selkreg."

"Wrong?" cried Selkreg, surprisedly.

"Yes; even you smart lawyers make mistakes at times. Margaret Aylward can tell them who and what they are."

"Undoubtedly; but I don't think she will," rejoined Selkreg, coolly, and taking no offense at the aspersion cast upon his acuteness.

"You don't?"

"No; Bartyne must have placed the seal of secrecy upon her lips, and she will not break it until assured of his death; and before she receives that assurance we will have the heirs in our power. The boy must be made short work of, and the girl must

become your wife. That's the programme. I see, however, just a little suspicion of trouble from this Margaret Aylward."

"What is that?"

"You say she was in love with Bartyne before he married her sister?"

"Yes."

"How do we know but what Bartyne may have married her? a man would do a stranger thing than that to provide a mother for his children; and they take naturally to the wife's sister, when there is one. It would be awkward to have a widow coming forward with her claim for thirds."

"Very. Here comes the train. Franklin is a small place, and it will not take long to discover where Margaret Aylward lives there."

"That's so. Having discovered that, the rest is easy."

The train slowed up at the platform, and they entered a car.

When they reached Franklin, they began at once their inquiries after Margaret Aylward, but no one could tell them where she was. They learned that she had left Franklin a long time, and their informant could not specify the particular time, but was sure she had two children with her, a boy and a girl, but had not the least idea how far or in what direction she had gone.

Indeed, all the information that Selkreg could gather—and he was as keen-sighted a lawyer as ever worked up a case—was of the most vague nature.

"This Margaret went from here with the greatest secrecy," said Selkreg, as he and Skelmersdale conferred together over the unsatisfactory information. "I think she done all she could to conceal the place of her destination."

"Then we will not find any clew to it here?"

"I am afraid not. I begin to be of your opinion, Skelmersdale; it looks now as if Genni Bartyne didn't know where his children were."

Skelmersdale smiled.

"You come to my opinion after I have changed it," he replied.

"Changed it?"

"Yes; I think Margaret Aylward left here with the children to join Genni Bartyne."

"The deuce you do! What makes you think that?"

"The very secrecy of her departure. You must remember that it was not safe for him to venture here with this charge of murder hanging over his head, and what more probable than that he should send to her to join him with the children?"

"There's something in that; and if the children were with him we shall find them in New York: so the best thing we can do is to get back there as speedily as possible."

"That's my idea exactly."

CHAPTER XV.

ALMIRA'S LOVE.

OSSIAN PLUMMER was greatly exercised over the visit of Edgar Skelmersdale and Cebra Selkreg to his office, and the moment they had gone he hurried to Almira's room in the other part of the house, for the gaunt sister of the gaunt overseer was also at the Bartyne mills, and acted as housekeeper for her brother and a number of the workmen there employed.

In all the emergencies of his life Ossian had sought Almira for counsel and advice, and he had never regretted taking any step which she had pointed out. He admitted the superiority of her intellect without cavil, but she never took advantage of this admitted weakness to domineer over him.

Almira had two strong affections in her life; one for her brother, whose interest and welfare had been her constant study; and the other for that strange fugitive she had found sleeping beneath the tree upon the bank of the Alleghany.

Though coarse in feature and ungainly in form a warm and tender heart beat beneath Almira's breast.

She was one of the women that men never seek. No one knew this better than herself. She had accepted her lonely destiny without a murmur. She asked not for any man's love, though she might have accepted it if it had come to her unsought; but as it did not come to her, she devoted herself to her twin brother with a devotion that deserved the name of heroism; and as he remained single like herself this made the bond between them all the stronger, and a wife might have lessened her care for him, if not rendered her services useless.

That she should ever meet a man that would inspire her heart to love was a thought that never entered her mind; and if it had she would have scoffed at it as an utter and ridiculous impossibility.

Yet she felt a strange sympathy in this fugitive whom she had persuaded her brother to give shelter to upon his raft. When the fever of delirium was upon him she had tended

"I will be guided by you," he said. "I will live in the hopes of a brighter day that will restore to me my children and my good name. Until then let me live in obscurity. I will assist your brother in his business; but the day will come when I can repay you for your great kindness to me."

We need not follow them in their wandering life upon the river, for they followed this traffic in lumber for several years, plying upon the Ohio and its affluents. One circumstance alone requires mention. Ossian Plummer went to Franklin to gain intelligence of the children, and heard of Margaret Aylward's strange departure. At this time one of those terrible steamboat accidents took place, which are of so frequent occurrence, and it was said that Margaret Aylward and the children had taken passage on this boat, and were among the lost.

This was a fearful blow to Genni Bartyne, and his mind was again overthrown; he was completely prostrated.

Almira again had to perform the office of a nurse, and she was as successful as before. His body was restored to health, thanks to the strong constitution nature had given him, but both the brother and sister perceived that his mind was not equally restored. He became subject to strange fits of forgetfulness, and required constant watching.

He experienced great difficulty in remembering the name which he had adopted (for he had utterly discarded his own), the name suggested by Ossian Plummer's mistake at their first meeting.

He insisted upon wearing rough clothes and working upon the raft like a common laborer, and here his great bodily strength proved of good service.

And Almira seeing him place himself upon an equality with themselves, reduce himself to her condition, as it were, felt a greater interest in him still, and this interest deepened and strengthened into love—a passion as absorbing as if her face and form had been as fair and comely as any maiden in the land.

Flowers will grow in strange places, in the clefts of rocks, where it appears as if there was not soil enough to give sustenance to their roots. Do not wonder then that love, a tender flower, should spring to life in Almira Plummer's heart.

This passion surprised her, she drifted into it so unconsciously; but when she became conscious of it, she might conceal it, but she could not struggle against it. She felt that her life was bound up in this man, and that her heart was divided between him and her brother. She had two objects now on which to exercise her devoted care.

At the first dawning of this passion Almira cherished a hope that it might meet with a return, but she was soon convinced of the fallacy of that hope. Events soon followed that completely changed their course of life and put the Plummers in the possession of the reward that had been promised them.

They heard of the discovery of petroleum near Genni Bartyne's property, and Ossian Plummer was furnished with the necessary papers to take possession and bore for oil. He did so with the greatest success. No one interfered with him. The whole neighborhood had been transformed by the "oil-fever," as it was called in those days. The most of Bartyne's neighbors had sold their lands and moved away.

The country was full of speculators and adventurers, attracted thither by the hope of gain. The story of the murder had died out; the question was not, who had been killed upon any piece of land, but could oil be "struck" there?

Ossian Plummer took possession, and his right to be there was not disputed. The oil was found, and the business soon assumed large proportions, and it was finally concluded to establish an office in New York.

During the development of the wells, Genni Bartyne had worked on the land as a common laborer. He was unrecognized by any former friends or acquaintances, and Ossian and Almira felt satisfied that no charge for what had happened in the past was likely to be brought against him; but they were not disposed to trust him by himself in New York. A relative of theirs had written to them from Vermont, asking for employment at the wells.

They remembered Chester Starke as a bright boy giving promise of a good manhood, and an opening was found for him at the wells, and when the establishment of the office in New York was discussed, it was decided that Chester Starke should go there to take the active charge of the business, and watch over the eccentricities of "Peter Shaw."

So much for the better understanding of what is to follow.

Ossian Plummer found his sister in the little room which she had selected for her own occupation. This room was upon the first floor, and had been intended originally for a library. It came quite handy to Almira, as it was on the other side of the hall from the kitchen, and she could overlook her assistants there, by leaving the doors open.

Almira was engaged upon some sewing, stitching methodically, for there was method in all her actions. She was dressed primly, but with scrupulous neatness. There was little change in her features. Time had passed lightly over her head in all these years, but he had not smoothed or softened the rugged aspect of her face. It was as gaunt and as freckled as ever. Her red hair was combed straight back from her forehead, with a severe plainness, and twisted into a knot at the back of her head.

The strange resemblance between the brother and sister was strongly noticeable when they were seen together. In form and feature they were the very image of each other.

Almira looked up from her work as Ossian entered the room. She saw at once, by the expression of his face, that something unusual had happened.

"What is it, Ossian?" she asked, quietly.

He sank down awkwardly in a chair opposite her, making it creak beneath his weight.

"Something's broke!" he replied, sententiously.

"Well, don't break my chairs," she responded.

"Something serious?"

"I reckon."

A spasm passed over her features, and she pressed one hand over her heart. Instinctively, she guessed the truth.

"To Peter?" she faltered.

They always called him by that name between them. She liked the familiar sound of it—it seemed to bring him nearer her.

There was a brief pause between them.

"Tell me what has happened," she said, trying to steady her voice; but it quavered despite her efforts.

Ossian narrated the visit he had received, and the claim put forward for the property. She listened to the end, nodding her head occasionally, but making no comment; and when he had finished she became immersed in thought.

"Do you believe Shaw signed that deed?" he asked, waiting until he got tired for some speech on her part.

She aroused herself from her reverie, crying quickly:

"Was it signed Peter Shaw?"

"Oh, no; it wouldn't have been of no account if it had been."

"Of course not."

"Do you believe Bartyne would sign away this property, and we making money just about as fast as we can take it in?"

"No; he never signed it—it is a forgery. Besides, after the deed he gave you, another deed is valueless."

Ossian chuckled.

"That's what I told them chaps," he replied, "and it just knocked 'em, the lawyer particularly."

"It surprised them?"

"Knocked 'em higher'n a kite! They looked sick when they walked away."

"This is some deep and dangerous game that is being played against us—against *him*," said Almira, and her features wore an anxious expression as she spoke. "I tremble for his safety. I think these men would never have dared to come here on such a mission had he been alive."

He evidently shared in her apprehensions, for he rejoined:

"Looks like it, I swow! I was a leetle afraid of this New York business, but you said let him go, and what you say, 'Miry,' is generally the way the thing is arranged."

She had dropped her sewing in her lap, now, and was kneading her bony fingers absently together, and her freckled face grew gray with anguish.

"Oh! if they have murdered him!" she cried, in faltering accents. "I never dreamed that there was danger for him in New York, or I should never have let him go."

"There's danger in letting anybody go to New York," said Ossian, in a discontented manner. "Why the city's full of murderers and thieves—even their public officers steal all they can lay their hands on—I've seen it printed in their own daily newspapers, so it must be true."

"Tush! don't be foolish!" exclaimed Almira, tersely. "New York is neither worse nor better than any other large city. Crimes are committed there, undoubtedly, and I think our poor friend has fallen a victim to some murderous plot."

Ossian looked very glum.

"Do you think they have killed him?" he asked.

The question forced a sob from Almira's lips.

"I fear so," she faltered.

"What are we going to do about it?" he questioned, perplexedly.

She was silent, having sunk into a gloomy reverie.

"Must I give up the property to these rascals? I hope I'm not calling them out of their name, and I don't think I am."

"Give up?—it is not yours to give!" she answered, with a fierce energy.

"But the law—"

"The law! a scarecrow to frighten fools. These men will never dare to take legal steps to gain possession of this property. It would be an endless struggle, if they did. Genni Bartyne never signed any deed to them. I would stake my life upon that!"

He shook his head in a dubious manner.

"But how are we going to prove that, if he is dead?" he urged.

She set her strong white teeth firmly together.

"We will not surrender this property, even if he is dead!" she answered. "We will hold it for the children—in trust for them, as the deed says."

"But if they are dead?"

"Still we will hold it. We have no proof of their death. He always cherished a hope that he should one day find them, and that hope, if he is dead, comes to us as a sacred legacy. Don't entertain any idea of giving up here; if such an idea has entered your head, drive it out; get rid of it at once and forever! The murderers of Genni Bartyne shall gain nothing by their crime!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PLUMMERS HOLD FAST.

OSSIAN PLUMMER gazed with honest admiration upon his sister.

"Good for you, old gal!" he cried. "You've got good spunk! I always like to hear you talk when I'm worried, for you yank the trouble right out of a man and put a good heart in him. Well, we've got the whip-hand here, and I guess we can hold on."

"We will hold on! I hope you did not give these men the least hope of obtaining possession here."

"Not an atom. I don't do anything without consulting you, 'Miry'; you ought to know that by this time."

"I do know it; and I think you are none the worse off for following the advice I have given you."

Ossian chuckled pleasantly.

"You are right there, 'Miry,'" he replied; "you've just made both our fortins—there's no disputing that. I'm superintendent here, with a share of the profits, and I'm satisfied with what I've made already out of it, if I don't make any more."

"You will make more; we will never be turned out by villains, even if Genni Bartyne is dead."

"Do you think he is dead, 'Miry?'" asked Ossian, earnestly.

Almira shook her head doubtfully.

"My heart bids me hope that he is not," she answered, thoughtfully; "and yet these men must have thought him dead, or they would never have dared to come here with such a claim."

"You don't think he signed that paper?"

"Never."

"It might have been forced from him by violence, threats of death, or something of that sort; I have heard of such things."

"The fear of death could never force his signa-

ture from Genni Bartyne," she answered, confidently. "I know the man!"

"That's what I think. But how are we going to find out about it?" he added, perplexedly.

"Chester Starke should know."

"To be sure!" he cried, his face brightening. "I'll write to him at once."

"The mail is a slow process of communication. Isn't there a telegraph from here to New York?"

"Yes. The office is in the railroad depot."

"Then go there and telegraph to Chester."

He started to his feet with alacrity.

"I will, by king! 'Miry, you do just take the deck for idees!"

"You ought to get an answer this evening," she continued, accepting the compliment he paid her as a matter of course.

"To be sure. I'll get one as soon as possible." He paused at the door. "What shall I say to Chester?" he asked.

"Make your message as brief as possible," she replied. "Where is Mr. Shaw?" will be sufficient. Chester will understand from that, if anything has happened to Peter Shaw, that we have heard something about it down here."

"That's the idee!" and he hurried away.

When left alone, Almira gave way to the sorrow that oppressed her soul.

"Dead! Oh! can it be? So good, so brave, so noble! Oh! that I could have died for him!"

She bowed her stern head and wept. It was a strange thing for her to do. They were the first tears she had shed since infancy. But they afforded relief to her oppressed mind.

Her burst of grief was as short as it was violent. She started to her feet as if ashamed of having given way to this emotion.

"Tush! this is idle folly!" she exclaimed. "I have something better to do than to sit down and cry. Tears will not bring him back to life, though they were the bitterest ones that were ever shed. His children! They must be found. I know I shall love them, if only for their father's sake. The villains that killed Genni Bartyne shall never have this property! I'll fire the wells first with my own hand, and consign all to destruction!"

She went to the wash-stand, that stood in one corner of the room, poured some water from the pitcher into the bowl, and bathed her face and eyes with it, thus removing all traces of her recent emotion. The water had a cooling effect upon her brain, and Almira soon looked her old impassive self again.

She went into the kitchen to superintend the preparations for the evening meal, for many of the workmen, as I have said, boarded and lodged in the house, and none of the maids employed there noticed anything unusual in her deportment.

But, notwithstanding the composure of her face, a feverish impatience filled Almira's veins. She was continually going to the front door, and looking down the road to see if Ossian was returning from the telegraph office.

He did not return to the house until the supper hour. She was at the door.

"Have you sent it?" she demanded, eagerly.

"Yes; just as you said."

"You did not get an answer?"

"Not yet; you can't do things in a minnit, even by telegraph. There will be an answer some time this evening, and the clerk promised to send it right up to me when it comes."

"I am all anxiety to hear."

"So am I. I tell you what, 'Miry, this affair makes me feel awful limber. I never was so set back in my life. He was a good friend to us—"

"The best we ever had!"

"It's come so sudden like on me that it takes the starch all out of me. If he's been made way with by foul play, we ought to do something about it—I swow we ought!"

"We will!" answered Almira, impressively. "The villains have revealed themselves to us. They told you their names?"

"Oh, yes; and I just stuck 'em in one corner of my memory, so as not to forget 'em. Edgar Skelmersdale and Cebra—not Zebra—Selkreg (he's a lawyer). Oh! I wasn't likely to forget 'em."

"If we discover that Genni Bartyne has been murdered, we will use every instrument that the law affords against these two men," rejoined Almira, in deep earnest tones that thrilled Ossian; "and if the law proves powerless to aid us, we will take the vengeance into our own hands. They shall not escape us."

"Good on your head, 'Miry," cried Ossian, excitedly. "That's the way to talk it, and I'll stick to you through thick and thin."

Almira smiled; she needed not this assurance upon the part of Ossian to tell her that she could depend upon his unquestioning assistance in all she undertook.

"Come to your supper; it is ready," she said, abruptly ending the conversation.

"Supper? Lord, I hain't got no appetite."

"Come in and sit down, as usual. We must not let any of the people here know of this trouble. Let us learn the worst before we disclose what has happened."

"You're right; the least said is the soonest mend-ed

"Kind of fetched you, has it, 'Miry?'" cried Ossian, as he stooped to pick up the telegram. "Phew! By king, there is something in it, after all!"

The telegram contained these words:

"Mr. Shaw missing. Suspicion of foul play. Come on." CHESTER STARKE."

These words had proved a fatal shock to the hope that Almira had cherished in her heart.

"Then he is dead!" she murmured.

Ossian shook his head sorrowfully.

"It looks like it," he answered.

"This is some deep-laid plot," continued Almira, thoughtfully. "He has been ensnared and murdered by villains, who seek to gain possession of these wells."

"Yes, and they may go for us next!" exclaimed Ossian, somewhat apprehensively. "By King! things are getting ticklish for us round here."

Almira, sunk in a reverie, did not hear these words. She started up suddenly, saying:

"Ossian, you must go to New York."

"To New York?"

"To-morrow, by the first train. This affair must be inquired into, and speedy measures taken against the murderers. Chester is honest and clever, but he needs an older head to counsel him in this emergency."

"It's a pity he couldn't have yours, then, 'Miry,'" rejoined Ossian. "You're the one that ought to go, not me. I shouldn't do any good there without you."

Almira became thoughtful over these words.

"Perhaps not," she murmured; but the words were more the expression of her thought than addressed to Ossian.

"You might do some good there," he continued, "but I don't think I could; besides, I'm wanted awful bad here just now."

"I can attend to every thing here," replied Almira, in her positive manner. "It is a *man* that is wanted in New York, not a woman."

"Maybe; but if I could only take your head along with me," urged Ossian, "it might be some use my going; but without it, 'taint."

Almira smiled; some idea appeared to have come to her suddenly that pleased her.

"I think that can be arranged," she said. "My head shall go with your form. There; we'll say no more about it to-night. Give me time to arrange my plans. I shall be up by daylight, and then I will tell you what I have decided upon."

This ended the conference between them at that time; but it was resumed after their early breakfast in the morning. Ossian looked quite relieved after this morning conference with Almira.

"I never did see such a woman for brains," he told himself, as he walked toward the works.

An hour afterward he was seated on the veranda smoking a cigar in the shade, when a neighbor who was driving by reined in his horse before the house.

This man was a Mr. Jackson, who owned a well a mile further up the road. Ossian and he were well acquainted, and Jackson always paused for a little chat when passing that way.

"Hallo, Plummer; then you didn't go?" he called out.

Ossian took his cigar from his mouth in some astonishment.

"Go—where?" he rejoined.

"Why, to New York."

"To New York?"

Ossian whistled gently to himself.

"Did I tell you so?" he asked.

Jackson sat on his wagon-seat and stared at Ossian.

"Why, don't you remember?" he returned.

"When?"

"At the depot, half an hour ago. And you got on the train just as it was starting off," continued Jackson, his astonishment increasing; "and I jumped on my wagon and drove right up here. Why, how the dickens did you get here?"

Ossian rather enjoyed Jackson's surprise.

"You've made a mistake, neighbor," he replied. "Twasn't me."

"Not you?"

"No."

"Why, I spoke to you, and you answered me; told me you were going to New York. I'd take my 'davy it was you!" Jackson asserted with great positiveness.

"Then how could I be here?"

This was a problem that defied Jackson's powers of solution, and his features plainly expressed his bewilderment.

"That's so, and it just beats me!" he admitted. "How did you get off the train and get here before I did? This is a pretty good horse of mine, and I came up the road lively!"

"I tell you, 'twasn't me."

Jackson shook his head incredulously.

"Seeing's believing," he rejoined. "If 'twasn't you, it was somebody that looks amazingly like you."

"That's it; you mistook somebody else for me. I've heard of such things before."

"And he had your voice, too," continued the bewildered Jackson. "Well, it's surprising, that's all I've got to say about it! If I hadn't found you here, I'd have taken my solemn oath that I spoke to you at the depot, and saw you get aboard the cars. Well, well; I never was so mistaken before in my life."

"It's odd how these things happen, isn't it?" remarked Ossian, and he puffed away philosophically at his cigar.

"I can't get it through my hair, no way," said Jackson. "If I'd been drinking, now, I might account for it in that way. Tanglefoot is apt to confuse a man's ideas, you know; but I'm just as sober as a deacon. The more I think of it, the more it puzzles me."

"Then I wouldn't think of it any more," suggested Ossian.

"I won't. How's your sister?" asked Jackson. The subject with a feeling of relief.

"'Miry?'

"Yes."

"She's tolerable, thank ye."

"Oh, by the way, I've got a message to her, from an old woman—come within an ace of forgetting it. Ask her to step out here a minute."

"Won't some other time do?"

"Well, it might; but I'd like to speak to her now,

if I could, while my memory's good. The old woman wants to get her receipt for making huckleberry shortcake."

"I will tell 'Miry when she comes home."

"Oh! she isn't to home."

"No; she's gone on a visit."

"All right; some other time will do." Jackson made a movement to drive off but checked it. "Plummer, that man I saw at the depot looked enough like you to be your brother."

"I never had a brother. 'Miry and me were the whole brood. There wasn't looks enough in our family to go round many children."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jackson, enjoying this joke of Ossian's at his own expense. "Well, take care of yourself."

"I'll try to, thank ye."

Jackson gave his horse the rein, and went rapidly up the road.

Ossian smoked for a few moments reflectively, and then took his cigar from his mouth.

"This thing is going to work," he told himself pleasantly. "It beats all natur' how cute women can be—and 'Miry just tops 'em all!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CO. OF SHAW & CO.

THE Plummers were not the only ones who took a strong interest in, and felt a warm affection for, that eccentric man who, when he could remember any name at all, called himself Peter Shaw.

Chester Starke was greatly troubled by the sudden and unexpected disappearance of Peter Shaw. And he held himself to blame, in a measure, for it.

He had been told by both Ossian and Almira of the infirmity of Peter Shaw's mind, and had been strictly cautioned to keep a sharp watch over him. Yet he was now missing despite all precautions. That Chester Starke was in fault for this unaccountable disappearance was not so plain, and no one but himself would have considered so.

He was disposed to blame himself too readily. How could he tell that Peter Shaw would depart upon any mission without apprising him of its nature, and the probable time that he might be absent?

As young as Chester Starke was—twenty-two—and as short a period as he had resided in New York, he had learned something of the snares that beset the feet of the unwary in the streets of the great metropolis.

He knew that the valuable gold watch and the well-filled pocket-book Peter Shaw carried upon his person were sufficient to tempt the ruffians who infest the city to waylay, rob and perhaps murder him.

The peculiar infirmity of Peter Shaw made him liable to become the prey of designing men. With all his cleverness, however, Chester Starke was far from guessing the true cause of this disappearance.

He was ignorant of Peter Shaw's true name, and the story of the past had not been revealed to him.

Though his relatives had great trust in him they had not told him these particulars. Almira had counseled this course.

"If he does not know it he cannot tell it," she said, with her terse shrewdness. "Not that I think he would do so willingly, but some accident might surprise it from his lips. He is wise beyond his years, I grant, but the wisest of men make foolish mistakes at times. Nor is there any occasion why he should know it; the disclosure would not benefit him or us. No, the secret lies between us three, and we three can keep it."

"I reckon," added Ossian.

And Peter Shaw thought Almira counseled wisely. Like her brother, he had great faith in the gaunt, hard-featured woman.

Thus Chester Starke was in the dark as to the cause of the eccentric conduct of the head of the firm; though, had he known the particulars of the dread tragedy that had clouded Genni Bartyne's earlier life, he would scarcely have deemed it possible that his old enemy had risen up against him again after the lapse of so many years.

Chester Starke was an energetic young fellow—indeed in this particular only did he resemble his relatives, the Plummers.

Peter Shaw had been greatly surprised when Chester first presented himself at the Bartyne wells. The Plummers called him "a cousin," and he had expected to find another type of the Yankee like Ossian, only younger.

Instead he saw a tall stripling, (Chester was only nineteen then)—fully six feet in height, with a frank face, good features, curly brown hair, and laughing blue eyes. He looked a trifle long-limbed and slender, but that was a failing that time promised to rectify. A little more flesh was all that was required to make the young Vermonter a fine specimen of manhood.

Peter Shaw liked him at the first glance—and with all his apparent imbecility of mind he was a keen judge of character.

"There's the making of a man in that young fellow!" he told Almira.

"The Starke blood is as good as any in Vermont," she answered. "Chester will prove himself worthy of it, I think."

And Chester Starke justified both their expectations. He performed his duties in a modest, unassuming manner, and gained the good will of all around him.

When he was selected to accompany Peter Shaw to New York, and was given an interest in the business, he saw that fortune was before him, and he determined to win, and deserve her smiles, by close attention and assiduity.

The duties of the office were mainly performed by him, Peter Shaw appearing as a silent partner. Chester signed all the chec's, and so the disappearance of Shaw did not interrupt the business of the office.

Chester had but one assistant, a bright New York boy, sixteen years of age, whose name was James Bates, though he was seldom called anything but "Jim." He was the only son of his mother, a poor widow, who had the care of several offices in the vicinity. Her occupation of scrubbing and cleaning had naturally led Jim to seek a situation in one of these offices, when he got large enough to assist his mother in her hard struggle for a livelihood.

He had gravitated from one situation to another

until he had now settled down as office-boy, at a liberal scale of wages, for the firm of Shaw & Co.

Jim was as much exercised as Chester Starke himself over the strange absence of Peter Shaw, and he took a very gloomy view of the matter. Perhaps, however, the fear of losing his situation consequent upon the dissolution of the firm of Shaw & Co. may have had something to do with this.

He had been a constant reader of one of the cheap daily newspapers, and had "supped full of horrors" from its columns. He remembered the many crimes that had been committed in the city, whose perpetrators had never been discovered; he remembered also the many strange disappearances of well-known characters, who had suddenly been missed from their daily sphere of life, and never heard of afterward—and the numerous bodies that have been found floating in those broad rivers that wash New York on either side, their clothes rifled of all valuables, and signs of violence upon the person, that have been exposed for days in the ghastly Morgue, and never recognized, never claimed by friend or relative; thought to be strangers, who had fallen victims to that organized gang of murderers who haunt the peripheries of the great metropolis.

He gave Chester Starke the benefit of his retentive memory the first day of Peter Shaw's absence, and this caused Chester to hasten at once to the newspaper office and insert the advertisement, which Peter Shaw read with so much satisfaction in the new domicile he had selected in the tenement-house.

That advertisement elicited, as we know, no response.

Jim Bates went about his duties shaking his head gloomily; and Chester could not prevent the fear that something serious had indeed happened from fastening itself upon his mind.

Encouraged by the patience with which Chester had already listened to him Jim dilated further upon the subject, and unburdened his mind freely.

"We'll never see the guv'nor again, sir," he said, lachrymosely.

"Think not, Jim?" returned Chester, evincing a strong anxiety.

"No, sir," continued Jim, with a dismal sigh.

"He's been gone for, and done for, sir."

"Done for?"

"Yes, made 'way with, sir. Robbed and murdered."

"Do you think so?"

"I just do, sir. It's awful to think of, sir, ain't it? and he was such a nice man, too!"

"I hardly think it is as bad as that, Jim. I think if he had been murdered his body would have been found before now."

"Lord, sir, lots of people have been murdered in this city and their bodies never found; and it was never known what became of them. There was Boss Harrington—didn't you never hear what happened him?"

"No. What was it?"

Jim assumed a mysterious air as he replied:

"Nobody ever knew, sir. He walked out one day and he never come back—just like the guv'nor, sir—and he never was heard of afterward from that day to this."

"I have an idea, though, that we shall hear from Mr. Shaw again," said Chester, assuming a confident tone.

"At all events, I shall continue the business here as if nothing had happened."

Jim was quite encouraged by these words, as he liked his situation and did not wish to lose it.

"We will go on as usual," continued Chester. "Mr. Shaw had very eccentric ideas at times and he may have taken a trip to Oil City without speaking of it—or forgetting to do so. I'll wait a week, and, if he does not return in that time, I will write to the superintendent of the wells, who is also interested in the firm, and tell him what has happened."

"Very good, sir," responded Jim; and then he ventured to suggest in addition: "But if I was you, sir, I'd get a detective and set him to hunting up Mr. Shaw."

Chester Starke pondered over this proposal!

"That might not be a bad idea," he replied.

"By no means, sir; the detectives know all the thieves and murderers in the city; and they may find out what has become of Mr. Shaw—if they were well paid for it. I don't suppose they could help him much now, only it would be a kind of satisfaction to know the worst. Don't you think so, sir?"

"I do, indeed; and I shall take all measures toward that end."

Having waited the week Chester Starke was writing a letter in the office to Ossian Plummer when the telegram from the Bartyne wells arrived.

The receipt of this telegram surprised Chester Starke greatly. He sent back the answer which has been recorded, and then pondered the matter with increased anxiety.

The hope which he had

"Thank heaven! you have come!" cried Chester, fervently, as he grasped his cousin's hand and shook it warmly.

Ossian returned the hand-shaking in a listless manner. Then he sunk wearily into a chair, and dropped the black bag upon the floor beside him.

"Has he come back?" he gasped.

"Mr. Shaw?"

"Yes—yes—yes!" was answered, in a breathless manner.

"No, I am sorry to say that he has not," replied Chester, gravely.

A moan burst from Ossian's lips, and he put his long fingers together and wrung them with a strangely piteous action.

"Oh, Chester! do you think he has been murdered?" he cried, plaintively.

Chester shook his head in a troubled manner.

"I don't know what to think," he answered.

The emotion evinced by this dry, withered man surprised his young relative. He had not deemed him capable of so much feeling. He knew that he was devoted to the interests of Peter Shaw, but he did not think he would take his mysterious disappearance so much to heart.

Never had Ossian Plummer looked so awkward and angular as at that present moment. His garments clung to his limbs as if they had been fashioned for some other person, and he seemed to feel strangely out of place in them.

A nervous tremor gave his frame a twitching motion as he sat upon the chair, and his hard features were overcast with a gray hue of anguish.

"Then there was some truth in what the villains said," murmured Ossian; but the words were more in self-communion than addressed to Chester.

The quick ears of the young man caught them, however.

"You have heard something then of Mr. Shaw's disappearance?" he questioned, quickly.

"Yes," answered Ossian; and he made a strong effort to subdue the emotion that had so unnerved him.

"That's strange! Who should know anything about it down there?" exclaimed Chester surprisedly.

The natural shrewdness and composure of Ossian came back to him.

"Chester there's more in this matter than you can understand," he replied. "There has been a deep-laid scheme planned against Peter Shaw's life and property, and I fear in one particular it has been successful."

"You think he has been murdered?" asked Chester, gravely.

"What else can I think? The villain said he had disappeared, and would never return."

"Ha!" cried Chester, excitedly. "Whoever said that must have had a hand in his disappearance."

"Undoubtedly. Fortunately we know who this man is."

"You do?"

"Yes, we know his name, and that of his confederate. They were so sure of their game that they revealed themselves."

"Two men came to the wells, and spoke of Mr. Shaw's disappearance?" cried Chester, surprisedly.

"They did."

"What was their object in doing 'his'?"

"They came to take possession of the property," replied Ossian, dryly. He was quite composed now.

"To take possession of the property?" exclaimed Chester, amazedly.

"Just so."

"On what pretext?"

"One of them, a lawyer, produced a deed of conveyance, which he said had been given to his companion—his client, he called him—by Peter Shaw. It was a deed of sale of the entire property at the wells."

"You did not surrender it?" cried Chester, quickly.

"I did not. Do you think I would?"

"No, no—of course not—you're not such a fool as that."

Ossian laughed, gutturally.

"Fools don't run in our family, Chester," he replied.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DISGUISED.

THERE was silence for a few moments between them.

"Have you any recollection of seeing any such deed about the office?" inquired Ossian, after a moment's thought.

"I have not."

"Do you think he would sign such a deed without consulting you?"

Chester reflected over the question.

"No; I do not think he would," he replied, at length. "All the business of this office passes through my hands. But couldn't you tell by the signature whether it was a forgery or not?" he added, quickly.

"I knew it was a forgery without looking at the signature," replied Ossian, in his quiet way, "for I knew that Peter Shaw had already deeded the property, and that he could not sell it, if he wished."

"Deeded it! to whom?"

"To me," answered Ossian, composedly.

"To you?"

"Yes, in trust for his two children."

"Has Peter Shaw two children?" inquired Chester, surprisedly.

"Yes, or had. There is some doubt about their being alive now."

"Then the claimants of the property did not know anything of the trust deed?"

"They did not. They fell into a pitfall they had not foreseen, and if they have killed Peter Shaw it was a profitless murder to them, for they can never gain anything by it."

"You will hold the property?"

"Yes, for Peter Shaw's children, and we will continue the business until he returns, or we have sure proofs of his death. In his absence we are the firm of Shaw & Co. You here, and I at the wells. Who can dispossess us?"

"No one, except the children, when they come of age. By the way, how old are they now?"

"The boy, if living, is about twenty, the girl eighteen."

"So old?" said Chester, thoughtfully. "You say if living, Ossian. Have you any doubt of it?"

"The father had, some years ago; they were supposed to have perished in a steamboat accident upon the Ohio river; and he believed that they had so perished."

"He did?"

"Yes; or he would have searched the country through for them."

"Has he ever heard anything since to change this belief?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Chester looked grave.

"He would have informed you if he had?" he questioned, after a little pause.

"Undoubtedly. He had no secrets from me. He has trusted me from the very beginning of our acquaintance."

"Of course; if ever honesty was personified in any human being you are that man, Ossian. But, if I understand this matter aright, you do not know where these children are?"

"I do not."

"And you cannot say, from your own knowledge, whether they are alive or dead?"

"I cannot—would that I could!"

"If they are dead, what then?"

Ossian looked at the young man in a bewildered manner.

"What do you mean?" he inquired.

"How can you hold the property for them if they are dead?"

Ossian smiled in his grim fashion.

"If I cannot prove that they are alive, who can prove that they are dead?" he answered.

"Ah! I see, you are determined to hold the property anyway."

Chester breathed a sigh of relief as he uttered these words.

"Just so," replied Ossian, sententiously. "And possession is a great thing in law I've heard. Never mind the children now; our first care must be to find out if possible what has become of Peter Shaw. I came here for that express purpose."

"And I am glad you came. We will put our two heads together and see what can be done. I was at a loss what to do until you came, as I cherished a hope that he had taken a trip to the wells, and had forgotten to mention his purpose to me before going."

"No; the first intimation we had that anything had happened to him was the visit of these two strangers, who came to claim the property."

"Then you did not see my advertisement in the paper?"

"That he was missing?"

"Yes."

"No, I did not see it; but it is not by advertising in the papers that we shall ever get any clew to the fate of Peter Shaw."

"How then?"

"These two men, Edgar Skelmersdale and Cebra Selkreg, know what has become of him. I think they are both in this city. By placing a spy over their actions we may learn something."

"Ah! we shall need a good detective here."

"Yes; employ the best you can find, stint not the expense, for we must find Peter Shaw, alive or dead."

"Have you any hope that he is alive?" cried Chester, eagerly.

"Yes, a faint one. It may be that the villains have him confined in some den in this great city, and will only restore him to liberty when they are put in possession of the property."

Chester Starke shook his head gravely.

"It is a faint hope, indeed, Ossian," he answered. "The villains would never set him free after obtaining a deed from him, for their future safety would then require his destruction. That they had the deed is proof, I think, that he is dead."

"No, Chester, that is no proof, for I know Peter Shaw too well to believe that he ever signed that deed. The fear of death could not extort his signature from him. That deed was forged, and, I think, the villains hold him in custody while they have tried what they can make by it. If he is living we will rescue him from their power."

"And if he is dead?"

"We will avenge his death!" answered Ossian, gutturally.

"Right, Ossian! We must use every engine the law affords to drag the miscreants to justice."

They were holding this conference in the private office, which was a small room partitioned from the main apartment, with a door and window of ground glass, through which no curious eye could penetrate.

A gentle knock at the door now interrupted their conversation.

Chester went to the door and opened it, finding Jim Bates there.

"What is it? Am I wanted?" asked Chester.

"Yes, if you please, sir," answered Jim. "Here's a queer old guy asking for you, and says he wants to speak with you on particular business."

"Indeed! Then ask him to step this way. This may be some one with information," he added, to Ossian, as Jim departed on his mission. "We must not neglect any tidings that may be offered us."

"Of course not; you are acting rightly," answered Ossian. "My idea is that this will prove to be an emissary from the villains, come to make you some proposal. I will sit at the desk here, and while pretending to read the newspaper, hold it so that they cannot see my face."

Ossian assumed this position, and the next moment Jim ushered the stranger into the office.

"Leave us and shut the door," said Chester.

Jim obeyed quite reluctantly, as he was filled with a keen curiosity to hear what the "old guy" had to say. He lingered near the door, however, in the hope that some stray sentences might escape through the keyhole.

The man who had sought this interview with Chester Starke appeared to be quite aged, for his hair, eyebrows and beard were of a snowy whiteness. He seemed to be in quite robust health, however, for his large frame looked sinewy, though he had quite a stoop to his broad shoulders, as if they had bowed under the weight of his gathering years. His white hair was quite long, and fell in fleecy locks down his neck and shoulders, and his beard was full and patriarchal.

His attire came under the head of "shabby genteel." It was evident that he had never been measured for the clothes he wore, as they hung baggily upon his frame.

They were dark in hue and coarse in texture. An old broad-brimmed felt hat added to the general shabbiness of his appearance. He also wore a pair of greenoggle-glasses. These, and his full beard, obscured his features to a great extent. This was the singular personage whom Chester regarded curiously, and at whom Ossian stole furtive glances from behind his newspaper.

"Well, sir?" said Chester, as the man appeared not to be in any hurry to broach the subject that had brought him there.

The person of Ossian, with his face shrouded by the newspaper, appeared to exercise a species of fascination upon the green goggles of the strange old man, for they were bent persistently in that direction, as if their owner had a suspicion that he was watched by keen eyes from that quarter.

He kept sliding about as he conversed with Chester Starke, trying to glance behind that paper screen, but Ossian frustrated his efforts by shifting the paper at every movement.

"It is one of the villains in disguise," was the mental conclusion Ossian arrived at.

"Are you Chester Starke?" replied the old man, in a strange, squeaky voice.

The moment he spoke Ossian recognized the voice as one he had heard before, and detected the man's evident attempt to disguise it.

"I am," answered Chester.

"You put an advertisement in the paper?"

"Ah! can you give me any information concerning Mr. Shaw?" cried Chester, quickly.

"I have come here for that purpose," replied the man, deliberately.

The newspaper in the hands of Ossian rustled violently, but he still held it before his face. The green goggles were turned toward it.

"He's here—I might have known it!" the man told himself.

"It's he, I'm sure of it!" was the reflection that passed through Ossian's mind at the same moment.

"You know where Mr. Shaw is?" continued Chester, eagerly.

"I do."

"Is he alive?"

"He is."

"Thank God!"

"Amen!" from Ossian, gutturally.

The man appeared to enjoy the emotion his words had caused.

"Ah! that pleases you, does it?" he cried. "Then if you are so glad to hear that he is alive perhaps you would give something handsome to have me tell you where you can put your hands on him?"

"Name your price," returned Chester, laconically.

"You see I'm in the detective business," continued the old man, "My name's Felix Findout—perhaps you have heard of me?"

"I never had that pleasure," returned Chester, politely. "I have never had occasion to call upon the detective agency until now."

"Ah! well, I suppose you know that we detective are on the make as well as other people?"

"I do not know it, but I should suppose so," answered Chester, with a smile.

"Then you expect to come down handsomely?"

"I do. What's your figure?"

"Do you think five thousand would be too much to tell you just where you can put your hand on Peter Shaw?"

"No, I do not," responded Chester,

"Certainly," responded Peter Shaw. "Sit down, Chester—sit down, Ossian; we three must hold a council of war—it's a lucky thing that you are here, Ossian, for I wanted you particularly."

They took chairs and sat down together.

"In the first place I will tell you of the narrow escape I have had," continued Peter Shaw.

He then related the events with which the reader is already familiar. Chester was deeply surprised as he listened to him; but Ossian, who knew the story of the past, was not so much amazed; but the knowledge of such a secret order being in active hostility against the life and property of Peter Shaw filled his mind with anxiety.

"And now tell me what brought you to New York?" asked Peter Shaw.

Ossian related the visit of Edgar Skelmersdale and Cebra Selkreg to the Bartyne wells.

"You see what daring rascals the villains are?" cried Peter Shaw. "The greatest circumspection will be necessary to defeat their murderous designs. Therefore I have assumed this disguise, and I wish them to continue to think that I am dead, for that will aid the scheme I have formed to utterly destroy this band of miscreants. Besides I have another motive for disguise and concealment; when Heaven so kindly protected my life, it also aided me to a great discovery."

Peter Shaw paused impressively.

CHAPTER XIX.

MEASURES OF DEFENSE.

"A DISCOVERY?" inquired Ossian.

"Yes; and a most singular one—indeed, miraculous, I might call it. I have found my daughter!"

This announcement took both Ossian and Chester by surprise.

"Your daughter?" they cried, simultaneously.

"Yes; the daughter whom I have not seen since she was an infant has been, by Heaven's aid, restored to me in a most wonderful manner. It was into her apartment I fell when I was thrust down the chimney."

"Wonderful, indeed!" exclaimed Chester.

"How did you recognize her?" inquired Ossian.

"By her likeness to her mother, her name, and the story of her childhood, as she told it."

"Does she know her true name?"

"No—only the first part of it, Henrietta, the name her poor mother gave her. My wife's sister, Margaret Aylward, for some reason, which is not very plain, took the children away with her from Franklin, and changed her name to Ward, or changed a part of it by dropping the first syllable; and under the name of Ward she reared the children in the little town of Erie, upon the lake of that name."

"And your boy, Raymond—where is he?" questioned Ossian, with more curiosity than he generally displayed.

"I do not know."

"He is not with Henrietta?"

"No; nor can she tell where he is to be found. It appears, from what she says, that he and his aunt did not agree, and so he ran away from her, and he has never been heard of since."

"How unfortunate! Do you think he is alive?"

"I cherish that hope."

"But if he was alive, would he not have sought for his sister before this, or written to her?"

"He could not write, not knowing where to send a letter to her. Margaret Aylward died suddenly, and Henrietta went to live with strangers. A chain of events led her to make her home in New York. She has had a hard life of it, poor girl! When I found her, she was living in apartments in an obscure tenement-house, she and a companion—a working-girl. Their finances were at a very low ebb, when Fate dropped me, like an old brick, down their chimney."

"You had a very narrow escape!"

Peter Shaw shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"Faith, yes!" he answered. "Providence worked a miracle in my behalf. Ah! Ossian, there is some justice in this world, after all. Heaven does not permit the guilty to triumph in their machinations always. These villains shall be foiled."

"You can rely on us for any assistance you may require!" cried Chester.

Peter Shaw smiled as he surveyed the sinewy, tall form of the young partner.

"I know it, Chester," he rejoined; "you and Ossian are as true as steel! Ah! Chester, had you been with me on the roof that night, we could have pitched the whole gang into the street!"

"I wish I had been, sir."

"No matter; we shall have an opportunity to measure strength with these villains, or I much mistake their temper."

"Did Henrietta feel astonished when you revealed yourself to her?" asked Ossian.

"I have not revealed myself to her."

"You have not?" cried Ossian, surprisedly.

"No."

"How could you resist the impulse to clasp her to your heart, and call her child?"

"I resisted it because I did not wish to endanger her safety. Were she known as my daughter, the same murderous malignity that follows me would follow her. She thinks me an old friend of her father, and that is sufficient for the present. Ah! Ossian, when you see her, so good, and amiable, you will be sure to love her!"

"I know I shall. Is she pretty?"

"She must be, if she resembles her father!" cried Chester, laughingly. "When are we to be favored with an interview?"

"Circumstances must determine that," answered Peter Shaw. "I think it best for us to remain in the tenement-house for awhile." He explained to them how he had taken apartments there. "I kept you in suspense three days longer than I needed to have done, but I wished to use all precautions. We do not know what spies may be watching this office. I thought that, if I ventured here in my own person, I should be seen, and then the villains would know that their murderous plot against my life had failed; and I wish to keep that information from them, as I have told you, until I can strike one decisive blow against them; and by that blow I hope to capture them all. I studied some time over the manner of reaching this office, and opening a communication, and a disguise naturally suggested itself. I would combat these False Faces with a masquerade. The girls procured the articles I required from a cos-

tumer in the Bowery. You must confess my disguise was an excellent one. Jim did not know me, nor did you, Chester."

"But I did," said Ossian, with a smile.

"Ah, yes! but then you have known me so long, old boy, that every tone of my voice rings familiarly in your ears. I could hardly have expected to have deceived you."

Peter Shaw clapped Ossian affectionately upon the shoulder, and the blood flushed strangely over Ossian's gaunt face.

"However, the disguise is good enough to deceive those miscreants, and so it will serve my purpose."

"Why not have them all arrested?" asked Chester.

"That is just what I am aiming at. I think I can locate their lodge-room, or meeting-place—I shall watch every night until I discover the night or nights they are in the habit of assembling, and then you and I, Chester, will get the aid of the police, and capture the whole lot."

"A good idea," rejoined Chester. "But I would advise you to go well armed for the future."

"I intend to do so. Look here!"

Peter Shaw took a revolver from his pocket, and exhibited it complacently.

"There's a good weapon," he continued—"a seven-shooter; the girl, Kate Vehslage, got it for me in a pawnbroker's shop—a smart girl that! She has been a good friend to Henrietta, and I mean to do something handsome for her. By the way, Ossian, there would be a good wife for you! She might put some flesh on your bones."

"Thank you, but I ain't looking for a wife just now," responded Ossian, dryly.

Chester laughed.

"You had better commence then, Ossian, and make up for lost time," he cried. "You can't afford to lose much more time, unless you intend to die an old bachelor."

Ossian did not condescend to reply to this.

"You must get you a revolver, and you also, Ossian," said Peter Shaw, as he returned his weapon to his pocket. "You may as well remain a week or so in the city, now you are here; that is, if you can be spared from the wells."

"They'll do down there, if I don't go back for a month," replied Ossian. "I left 'Miry in charge."

"Then everything's safe; Almira is as good as a man, any time. She is the smartest woman I ever saw. I don't say it, Ossian, to flatter you, for you know it as well as I do. Why, what's the matter with you, man? You're blushing just like a woman."

Ossian passed one hand over his eyes to remove a suspicious moisture that had gathered there.

"I'm a little upset," he answered, huskily. "Life was so quiet with me before these surprises that they come upon me something like claps of thunder in a summer sky, when the sun's shining bright, and nobody expects a storm. It gave my heart an awful wrench when I thought you was dead, and I hasn't got quite over it yet."

Peter Shaw shook Ossian warmly by the hand.

"I know your heart, old boy!" he cried. "A kinder and an honest one does not beat within a human breast. Well, well, we have passed many happy days together, and there is a bright prospect for the future. I have found my daughter, and Henrietta's smiling face will give additional sunshine to our lives. Let us but defeat the schemes of this Edgar Skelmersdale and his murderous crew, and then we can live in peace and happiness."

"We will defeat them!" cried Chester Starke, with the fervor of youth.

"We'll make a good try for it, leastways," added Ossian, in his dry fashion. "But I agree with you, Peter, that we can't be too careful in our movements. Now, the little man with a head like a terrier dog, said he was a lawyer, and that his name was Cebra Selkreg."

"Do you think he gave his right name?" asked Peter Shaw, thoughtfully.

"Yes, I do. He seemed to think that Ossian Plummer was a simpleton, and that the claim he put forward would not be disputed."

"Ah, ha, ha! He didn't know Ossian Plummer as well as I do. Nothing could make him abandon the trust I confided to him."

"Of course not."

"And there was Almira—he never did anything yet without first consulting her, and she would not have permitted him to yield the property, even if he had been disposed to do so."

"She would not."

"Almira is a remarkably clever woman," said Chester Starke. "I don't mean any disparagement to you, Ossian; you are smart enough, but I consider her an uncommon woman. She's got brains, and she knows how to use them."

Ossian smiled, grimly.

"You and Peter have got a good opinion of Almira," he answered; "but you can't worry me any by praising her. I think she's been a good sister to me, and I like to hear her well spoken of. But now to get back to what I was going to say; I think Cebra Selkreg has got an office here in New York, and if he has it will be easy enough to find out where it is. Now I would advise putting a good detective officer on his track, to watch his goings and comings."

"A good idea," cried Peter Shaw, promptly.

"I think so, too," added Chester.

"And in watching the lawyer, the detective would also watch his employer, Edgar Skelmersdale, the chief villain in the scheme," continued Ossian.

"Yes; that would be killing two birds with one stone!" exclaimed Chester, laughingly. "They must be constantly in communication, and one detective, I should think, would do for both."

"Be it your care, then, Chester, to see the detective and employ him," said Peter Shaw. "Go to headquarters in Mulberry street, and get the smartest man of the force. Promise him good pay for his services; we can afford to be liberal in this emergency."

"I will attend to it, sir."

Peter Shaw resumed his disguise.

"Now I must return to my new home," he said.

"Do you not find it inconvenient and uncomfortable there?" asked Ossian.

"Far from it! never was man more waited upon, or better served than I am. I have two handmaids

who minister to my comfort with great diligence; and the best of it is, that they do it out of pure goodness. Kate may be a little interested in her devotion to me, perhaps—and that is but natural for a girl of her class—but Henrietta's attention is spontaneous and from real affection, I am assured."

"Perhaps the voice of nature, whispering to her soul, prompts this, sir," suggested Chester.

"It may be so; but whatever prompts her, there is no doubt but that she has, even in the short period of our reunion, conceived a strong affection for me. Why, my heart has grown young again beneath her smiles, and my mind is freer from the clouds that have so bewildered it in the old days. Ah! if we can only defeat the schemes of these villains, there will be a bright future for us all."

"Can't I see Henrietta?" inquired Ossian, with an eagerness that rather surprised Peter Shaw, as the gaunt overseer was generally so impassive in his nature.

Peter Shaw shook his head:

"Not yet—not until we have struck a blow—which will be a final one, I hope—against our foes," he answered. "I dare not trust it. The villains know your face as well as mine, Ossian; indeed, no one who had once seen that honest face of yours would be likely to forget it."

"That's a delicate way of saying that I will never be hung for my beauty," returned Ossian, with his grim smile; but he turned away his head, and something like a spasm of pain contracted the hard features of his face.

Neither Peter Shaw nor Chester Starke observed this, however; they were too intent upon their own thoughts.

"No, I must not give the villains one chance against us," continued Peter Shaw. When I leave this office I shall take a very circuitous way back to the tenement-house. I will act as if spies were on my track, and be sure that I am neither watched nor followed before I enter the house."

"But you do not intend to remain long there, sir?" questioned Chester.

"Only until we perfect our scheme to insinuate these scoundrels; that puts me in mind that there will be a commission for you, Ossian. I want you to find me a nice furnished house, in the upper part of the city, between Thirtieth and Fortieth streets would be a good location, I think. Go to some real-estate agent in that neighborhood and make inquiries. Secure a proper house; you know what I want as well as I do. This Kate Vehslage will make a capital housekeeper, and you can call and see us, when we are domiciled there, Ossian, and court her, if you like."

"Really, you seem anxious to provide me with a wife," returned Ossian. "Why not speak for yourself?"

Peter Shaw's brow clouded.

"Pshaw! I'm past the time," he exclaimed. "No, no, my heart is with the dead! I shall never marry again."

"Nor I!" replied Ossian, tersely.

"Tush! You are younger than I am. Eight years, at least."

"Maybe; but my heart is deader than yours."

Peter Shaw contemplated Ossian's stern features curiously. It appeared to him that those features twitched with an unwonted emotion.

"Why, Ossian, I do believe you have been crossed in love!" he cried, suddenly.

"What makes you think so?" rejoined Ossian, dryly.

"You act as if you were."

"Do you think any one could love me?" asked Ossian, plumply.

The plainness of the question, combined with Ossian's plain face, confused Peter Shaw somewhat.

"Well, that depends," he answered, hesitatingly. "Women don't always marry men for their beauty. You're pretty well to do now, Ossian, and a sensible girl might look beneath your rugged face to the warm heart and honest soul, and be content to take you."

"For the sake of my money?"

"That might be an inducement, I grant."

"Thank ye, Peter; but I'm not looking for one of that sort."

"Pshaw! you're too particular. If a smart, poor girl should be willing to overlook the disparity of years between you, for the sake of a comfortable home, why blame her? This is a selfish world, Ossian, and the man who expects the least from his fellow-beings is the man of the least disappointments. There, I must go, but I shall look in again to-morrow."

CHAPTER XX.

A DISCOVERY.

"HEAVENS!"

This exclamation broke involuntarily from the lips of Edgar Skelmersdale, as he stood upon the corner of Broome street and the Bowery, waiting for a car to pass him.

A fair young girl came and stood beside him, also waiting for the car to pass. He had a full view of her features, and his eye dilated, and the exclamation I have noted burst from his lips, as he gazed upon that sunny face.

home? It seems incredible! Have I made a mistake? Have I been deceived by one of those strange resemblances which are of so frequent occurrence? No, no; the mother's features are too indelibly stamped upon my memory, and only her child could bear that face! But would he place her in such a locality as this? I do not know what to make of it! She may be here on some business—some charitable errand, perhaps? Then she will not remain long. I will wait and see."

For an hour he loitered near the house, but Henrietta did not appear.

"It is useless to remain here," he muttered, his patience becoming exhausted. "I will go to Selkreg's office, as I intended when she so unexpectedly crossed my path. I think he will be as much surprised as I was. There will be no trouble in finding the house again; I have carefully noted it."

With this he walked swiftly away. He went down the street to Grand, passed through it to Center, turned the corner and continued until he reached a dilapidated building, which bore a number of small signs about its door. One of these was inscribed: "CEBRA SELKREG, Attorney at Law."

He entered this building, went up a flight of well-worn, dirty stairs, and knocked at the first door on the landing.

This door bore the number 5, and the name of Cebra Selkreg.

"Come in!" cried a voice within.

Skelmersdale opened the door and entered the dingy den that Selkreg called his "office."

It was a square apartment, of small dimensions, with one window looking out upon the yard. Its furniture was scanty. It was without a carpet. There was a high desk upon one side, with a high stool beside it, and the desk was littered with an old inkstand, pens in wooden handles, bits of sealing-wax, blotting-paper, a piece of rubber, and some scattered sheets of paper, law blanks. This was the post that Selkreg's clerk occupied when on duty; but he had been sent away at this time to serve a summons. There was a book-case, filled with law-books, in calf bindings, in one corner, looking grim and dusty.

A round table, covered with green baize, occupied the center of the apartment, and on this were little packages of papers, tied with red tape, arranged in a circle around a notarial seal. These were Cebra's briefs.

Then there was a rusty stove, and three arm-chairs, and a small desk by the window.

Opposite the stove was a door marked "Private office." This door was half glass; and seen dimly through the glass was a green curtain. The curtain was hardly necessary, though, for the glass was so begrimed with dirt that it was almost impossible to see through it.

Tilted back in one of the arm-chairs, with legs on the small desk, sat Cebra Selkreg, smoking a cigar. He appeared to be in a state of placid enjoyment.

"Ah! it's you—I thought so!" he exclaimed, as Skelmersdale entered. "You're late. I expected you an hour ago. Sit down—have a weed?"

"No—I'm in no humor for smoking."

Skelmersdale took hold of one of the chairs, and the back came off in his hand. He hurled it to the floor with an imprecation.

"Try the other—that's whole," said Selkreg, composedly.

Skelmersdale sunk moodily into the other chair.

"Why don't you get some new chairs?" he inquired, pettishly.

"What's the use? I don't expect to keep my shingle up here much longer, you know. I'm only waiting for our ship to come home, eh? You know the saying—poetical, isn't it?"

"Bah!" growled Skelmersdale.

"Well, you are out of sorts."

Selkreg looked keenly at his client with his little ferret eyes.

"Something has happened? I knew something was up the moment you entered the room. Is it bad news?"

"I don't know how you may take it. I have made a wonderful discovery."

"Ah! What?"

"I have found her—the girl."

Selkreg removed his legs from the desk with surprising alacrity.

"What, the daughter?" he cried.

"Yes."

"The deuce you say!"

"I met her just now, in the Bowery."

"Pew! Well, that is news! And does that make you grumpy? Why, that is just what we want. How did you happen to meet her?"

Skelmersdale recounted his meeting with Henrietta, and Selkreg was very much astonished, as Edgar had supposed he would be.

"Now, that's what I call luck!" he exclaimed.

"We might have hunted for her a year without finding her, and you just stumbled on her accidentally. Why, this is splendid! I hope that didn't put you out of temper?"

"I don't know how it is, but the sight of that girl's face, so like her mother's, seemed to awaken in my breast a feeling of—of—you will laugh—of remorse."

"Fudge! Don't get such ideas into your head, or you'll spoil our scheme."

"Ah! if you knew how I loved that woman—"

"Transfer that love to the daughter: that's the plan, you know, and you'll be consoled for your disappointment in the past."

"You are right. Such thoughts are folly."

"To be sure; a man never thought of a woman yet without committing some folly. I don't understand what you are annoyed about. Why, this thing is just working beautifully into our hands."

He was silent for a moment, as if revolving something in his mind, and then he added, suddenly:

"But you are sure it is the daughter?"

"I am positive of it!"

"It would be awkward to make a mistake, you know. Now there's one phase of the matter that puzzles me."

"What's that? Her residence? That she should be living in the tenement-house?"

"Exactly."

"That is what I cannot understand, myself. I followed her and saw her enter the house. I could not reconcile it to my mind that she should be living in such a house and such a neighborhood, and so I

waited for full an hour to see if she would come out again."

"And she did not?"

"She did not." Selkreg was again silent for a few moments, shaking his head gently to and fro.

"I don't understand this at all," he resumed. "He wouldn't take her to live in such a house as that, surely?"

"Such was my thought."

"Do you think they were together here?"

"How else could she be here?"

"Oh, come, we are asking each other conundrums! This will never do. We might sit here until doomsday making surmises and then never hit within a mile of the truth. We must go to work, and find out, in the first place, if she does live there; next, how she came there, if she does live there, and who she is living with."

"Which of the band shall I assign to the office?"

"Nightshade."

"Yourself?"

"Exactly. It's too particular to be trusted to any of the rest; besides, as we intend to shake them when fortune crowns our scheme, it isn't best to let them know any too much of the business we have in hand. I'll attend to this at once. The brother might be there."

"I never thought of that."

"Ah, in my business we have to think of everything. It takes *finesse* to make a good lawyer."

"I should imagine so. Your idea, then, is to get the girl in our power as speedily as possible?"

"To be sure. There's always danger in delays, the proverb says. I'll spot the house at once, find out if she really lives there, and who she is living with. She is good and handy to our lodge room, and we can get her there, I think, without much trouble."

Skelmersdale shook his head.

"I am afraid that will not be so easily done as you think," he replied. "Remember that is a very populous neighborhood. You could not seize her by force without attracting attention."

"Force? Oh, there'll be no force about it. Nobody in the street will be anything the wiser for my proceedings. You don't think I'm fool enough to attempt to carry her off in broad daylight, do you?"

Edgar Skelmersdale smiled.

"Hardly as bad as that," he answered; "but I did not know but what you might attempt to do so in the evening."

"That would be worse still; the streets are crowded with people in that locality when the lamps are lit. Oh, no; I have a better plan than that, I promise you."

"Do you intend to decoy her, as we did the father?"

"No; I hardly think we could do that; these young girls are apt to be skittish. No, no, this girl shall disappear so utterly and entirely that the sharpest detective upon the force will be unable to form the least idea of what has become of her."

"How will you contrive that?"

Cebra Selkreg chuckled at the puzzled expression of Skelmersdale's face.

"Leave it to me," he rejoined. "You have never known me to make a bungle in my plans yet, have you?"

"No; I have great faith in your ability, Selkreg, as you must know, or I should never have offered you so liberal a percentage for obtaining the Barntyne property for me."

"It's worth it, my boy, it's worth it; and, without being egotistical, I can say that you could not get it without my help."

"I am willing to admit it. Your advice has stood me in good stead, and if you place this girl in my power, the reward for all your services will be speedily forthcoming."

"That's what I'm aiming at. I'm just as anxious to see you in possession of the property as you are to get it. My fingers just itch to handle the profits of those flowing wells, which bubble up their greasy contents so generously and spontaneously. I shall supersede Mr. Ossian Plummer in his office of superintendent with a great deal of pleasure. Who would have thought that wooden-faced Yankee would have been so shrewd?"

"I fear we shall have a great deal of trouble in dispossessing him yet," returned Edgar Skelmersdale, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Do you? I'll make short work of him! Only wait until you are married to the girl; that's our next move."

"And a very difficult one."

Selkreg laughed, rather conceitedly.

"Genius can surmount difficulties," he answered. "It gives a man the clew to every Cretan labyrinth. I'll show you a way out of this difficulty so easily that you will be astonished."

Edgar Skelmersdale smiled.

"I am ready to be astonished," he replied. "When am I to have the girl?"

"To-night!"

"So soon?"

"Unless I miss my calculations, and I don't think I shall."

"You have astonished me already."

"She shall be in the lodge-room to-night. To-morrow I will procure the minister, and the marriage can take place to-morrow night."

"But if the girl should refuse?"

"She must consent, or—"

"Or what?"

Selkreg paused, ominously.

"She must die!"

A shudder convulsed Edgar Skelmersdale's frame.

"No, no, you must not kill her!" he cried, quickly.

"I can never consent to that!"

Selkreg shrugged his shoulders, disdainfully.

"Would you let the life of this puny girl stand between you and this immense property?"

"I do not know," answered Skelmersdale, slowly and moodily. "There is more blood upon my head now than I will know how to answer for. Ah, when I think of the mother's hapless fate! Heaven knows it was not in my mind to kill her that night. I merely threatened her, to force compliance to my wishes. He came unexpectedly, and in the desperate struggle that ensued, she received the blow aimed at him."

Selkreg listened attentively to this muttered revelation of the past.

"I see," he returned. "He was found with the body, and accused of the crime?"

"Yes."

"And that charge has never been cleared away?"

"No." "Your confession alone then can free his name from the stain that rests upon it?"

"Yes. When Henrietta is my wife, cannot I exonerate his name in some way, without criminating myself?"

Selkreg pondered over this question.

"Well, yes; something of that sort might be done, I should say," he answered, at length; "but is it worth while? The man's dead and gone, and it can't do him any good; and Henrietta will bear your name. Besides, almost all the people who knew Genni Bartyne, and resided in that neighborhood at the time, have sold out to oil speculators and moved away. The people about there now probably never heard of Genni Bartyne; and they are too busily employed in trying to make money to think of anything else. You know you were surprised at the great changes that had taken place about there."

"True; it was so changed that, had I been suddenly dropped down there, I should have thought that I had never been there before."

"Time works wonders," is an old saying, but a true one. I should never rake up the past when I went back there, if I were you."

"Your advice is good, and I will follow it. But these Plummers, what will keep their tongues still?"

"Death!" replied Selkreg, sententiously.

"More bloodshed?"

"Yes; but it shall be the last act of the False Faces. The Plummers shall be seized at night, by a body of masked men—you have read the exploits of the Masked Robbers in the papers, and it will be thought to be their deed. We will have the house robbed, to give a greater color to this belief, and the Plummers can be knocked on the head, and their bodies tumbled into the creek. That will be the last of them."

"Perhaps it would be as well to dispose of them that way," returned Skelmersdale, thoughtfully.

"It's the only way to make them *quiet!*" cried Selkreg. He arose briskly from his chair. "Now to business. I must reconnoiter the tenement-house, in the first place. That's easily done by going there on a pretense that I want to hire some rooms. Then I must notify the band that a meeting for urgent business will take place to-night. If you will look in at Doctor Watervliet's office, about six o'clock, I can give you further details, and all the information I pick up about the girl."

"That's a good idea; I will be there."

"Of course it's a good idea—all my ideas are good," replied Selkreg, complacently. "That was another good idea taking Dr. Watervliet into our society; he's a good doctor, though he was starving for want of patients. I christened him HENBANE, in the lodge. Not bad that, eh? Ha! ha! ha!"

"Yes, and he called you Nightshade in return."

"Yes, on the principle that one good turn deserves another. We can have the marriage take place in his parlor. I'll terrify the girl so that she will be glad enough to say 'yes,' and not claim the minister's protection. Come, I can leave the office, for Tom will be back shortly."

They left the office together.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE YOUNG DETECTIVE.

CHESTER STARKE called at the bureau of the detective police, and was ushered into the presence of Colonel Whitley, the chief of the department.

He made his business known to him.

"I think I have just the man to suit you," said Colonel Whitley. "He is quite a young man, and has been but two years on the force, but he has displayed, in every case intrusted to him, uncommon acuteness and ability. He's quite a young Hercules, as bold and as brave as a lion. He has been a sailor and a great traveler, and appears to have visited every land upon the face of the globe. He speaks half a dozen languages, which makes him very useful to us. He's an uncommon man. You'll say so when

Ray laughed, in his pleasant manner.

"Faith! I am not so much ahead of you in that respect," he answered.

"Your father must have been a large man?"

"I have heard so; but my memory of him is very faint."

"He died when you were young?"

"Yes. But you did not come here to learn my family history, I know. Pray be seated, Mr.—Mr.—how shall I call you?"

"Chester Starke."

"Ah! thank you."

They sat down facing each other, and Ray took a small note-book from the breast-pocket of his coat, and a pencil from his waistcoat pocket.

"Permit me to make a note of that," he continued. "I always jot down all the names in a case. I have a good memory, and I keep it clear by not burdening it too much."

He wrote the name in his book.

"The colonel recommended you highly to me, Mr. Ray," said Chester.

Ray smiled, and moistened the point of his pencil with his lips.

"I have made some lucky hits, and that gives a man reputation in this business," he said; "and yet, with all my supposed acuteness, you will be surprised to hear, perhaps, that one case has completely baffled me."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I have detected robbers, recovered stolen property, but there exists a person that I am most anxious to find, and all my researches have proved futile. I merely mention this to show you that I can fail as well as other people."

Chester smiled.

"You put it very modestly, Mr. Ray," he rejoined. "We are none of us infallible; but you are the very man I want; I am sure of that."

"So much the better. If you have confidence in me, that will enable me to work your case to the best advantage."

"You have led a very adventurous life?"

"Yes; I have been nearly round the world in my time."

"A sailor?"

"Not altogether; though I began my career in that capacity. I could tell you some surprising things; but I don't think they would help your case, and I hardly think we have the time to spare. Let's get to business—we can discuss these other matters when we are better acquainted, and have more leisure. Give me the points, please."

"Well, then, my case, as you call it, is this."

Whereupon Chester Starke narrated the particulars of the attack upon Peter Shaw's life, and his desire to destroy the band of False Faces.

"You may be surprised to hear that such a band could exist here in New York, right under the eye of the police," he added, in conclusion.

"By no means," answered Ray. "I am not surprised at anything existing in this great metropolis. Why, one half of the inhabitants of this city do not know the other half live. I have been in London and Paris, and I can assure you that New York is not far behind those European capitals in opulence, splendor, squalor, want, rascality and crime. And so this band, or rather the leader of it, has formed a scheme to gain possession of these wells?"

"It appears so."

"And it also appears that they do not stop at murder when it will aid their plans?"

"They are desperate characters, evidently."

"Oh, there's no doubt of that! And the prize they seek is a rich one. I know something about these wells; I have been down in that country."

"Indeed?"

"Oh, yes; didn't I tell you I have been almost everywhere? What is the name of the leader of this gang, did you say?"

"Edgar Skelmersdale."

Ray noted the name down in his book.

"Have you any idea of his personal appearance?"

Chester gave the description he had received from Peter Shaw.

Ray noted this down also.

"Very good. And this villainous lawyer, who is aiding and abetting him, what's his name?"

"Cebra Selkreg."

"What is he like?" asked Ray, making a note of the name.

Chester gave the description, and Ray wrote it down.

"Very good; that's a first-class portrait. It will be easy enough to tell him at a single glance."

"Don't you think the first thing to be done is to find his office?" suggested Chester.

"Certainly; and that will be very easy. He is a shyster, undoubtedly, and I shall find his office somewhere in the vicinity of the Tombs. These shysters flock around the city prison as vultures do around carrion. His office is on Center street, I'll wager, and his sign will be there—that is, if the name was not an assumed one, used merely during the visit to the wells."

"Both Mr. Shaw and Ossian Plummer are strongly of the opinion that he gave his right name," said Chester.

"Who is Ossian Plummer?"

"He is the superintendent of the wells, and one of the firm. In fact, the firm consists of Mr. Shaw, Ossian and myself. I am the junior partner."

"A good berth, I should say."

"I can't complain. Indeed, Mr. Shaw has treated me most liberally—like a son, in fact."

"He has no son of his own, I suppose?"

"He thinks he has."

Ray looked surprised.

"Thinks he has—doesn't he know?" he cried.

"No; he cannot tell whether his son is alive or dead."

"That's singular."

"It is. Indeed, there is a strange story connected with this affair—but then I don't know as you would care to hear it."

"Not care to hear it! My dear sir, it is essential that I should be put in possession of every detail that can possibly bear upon the case. You have no idea how the smallest trifles sometimes aids us. Remember, we have to deal with men who are steeped to the eyes in villainy and craft, and we must use every effort to defeat their murderous designs and bring them to justice. We must not cast aside a single straw, if we can make it serviceable. I need

scarcely tell you that what you impart to me will be held as sacred as the confession of a sinner to a priest."

"I have no doubt of it; but I can only give you a vague idea of this matter, as my information upon the subject is very scanty. It appears that Mr. Shaw, from some cause, lost his wife and children about thirteen or fourteen years ago."

"How lost them?"

"The wife, I think, was killed, and the children confided to the care of an aunt, while Mr. Shaw and Ossian Plummer were engaged in business in another part of the country. This was before the wells were opened on the Bartyne property."

"This property belongs to Mr. Shaw?"

"There again I am at fault; I could not say for certain whether it belongs to Mr. Shaw or Ossian Plummer; but as these men claimed it on a deed of sale from Mr. Shaw it must belong to him," added Chester, thoughtfully.

"Of course. How did he lose his children?"

"When he came back to Franklin, where he had left them in charge of his wife's sister, he found that she had left that place, taking the children with her."

"Could he not discover where she had gone?"

"No; although he made every effort to do so. Then he heard that they had taken passage on a steamboat on the river, which was burned, with a great loss of life among the passengers."

"And they were supposed to have perished?"

"Yes; and so he gave up the search for them. I must tell you that it is only within the last week that I received these details, which I extracted from Ossian Plummer, and he answered my questions in the briefest manner. Neither he nor Mr. Shaw seemed disposed to speak much of the past. Mr. Shaw's mind has been impaired by those circumstances, I think, for at times he is strangely forgetful. Had it not been for the sudden and unexpected finding of the daughter, I should, probably, have never heard anything about these children."

"How was that?"

Chester explained this circumstance to Ray, who listened to him with deep interest.

"One can almost trace the hand of Providence in this," he commented, thoughtfully. "So the girl is found? Have you heard her name?"

"Yes, Henrietta."

"Ah! a very pretty name, and, I have no doubt, a very pretty young lady."

"I should judge so from her father's words; and, I must confess it, I am very anxious to make her acquaintance."

"Ah! ah! be careful of your heart, my friend!" cried Ray, laughingly.

Chester colored a little.

"Pshaw! it is not likely that she would ever waste a thought on me," he returned.

Ray laughed pleasantly.

"I am not so sure of that," he answered. "Girls like a good-sized man, as I know from experience; particularly if they are somewhat petite in figure themselves. But the boy appears to be lost entirely, eh?"

"Yes; no tidings can be learned of him."

"Did you hear his name mentioned?"

"Yes; it is Raymond."

"Raymond what?"

"I did not hear any other name mentioned, but as the girl has been passing under the name of Ward, possibly he may bear that name, too."

"It is very likely. Do you think that Shaw is the right name of your senior partner?" he added, carelessly.

Chester stared at this question.

"To tell you the truth," he replied, "I have never thought anything about it. He was introduced to me as Mr. Shaw, and I took that to be his name, as a matter of course. But now, when I do think over the matter, it occurs to me that Shaw is *not* his name."

"That's my idea exactly."

"Then why does he call himself Shaw?" asked Chester, perplexedly.

"His motive for this change of name may grow out of those circumstances of the past, which he and the other man, Plummer, appear to have concealed even from you."

Chester pondered over this in a bewildered manner.

"It's a very mysterious affair altogether!" he exclaimed.

"That's my opinion."

"And there are matters connected with it that I fail to comprehend."

"I think the capture and destruction of this band of False Faces will make all clear."

"Do you?" asked Chester, somewhat dubiously, as if this was not so clear to his mind.

"I do, indeed. I also think that Mr. Shaw's change of name was through anxiety for his children, to save them from some unmerited disgrace."

"Disgrace?" questioned Chester, surprisedly.

"Yes; that might come to them through him."

"Oh! that is impossible!" cried Chester, quickly.

"A better man than Peter Shaw never lived!"

"That may be true enough; but innocent men have been accused of crimes before now, their good names stained, and their lives imbibed, and they helpless to clear themselves in the eyes of a world whose opinion is, has been, and always will be, notoriously censorious and unjust. I think Peter Shaw is one of those innocent victims of another man's crimes."

These words made a strong impression upon Chester Starke's mind, and many circumstances in the past added to their convincing weight.

"You are right, sir," he rejoined. "This is a solution that makes this matter clearer to my mind. This would account for much of the strangeness—eccentricity we have called it—that I have noted in Mr. Shaw's words and manner. But if his name is not Shaw, what can it be?"

"Ah! that is a riddle that is not easily guessed," answered Ray, with a smile; "nor is it worth wasting any of our time upon at present. I think Mr. Shaw will inform us himself, after we have freed him from the persecution of this band of villains."

"We ought to be able to accomplish that."

"Oh, we will! Before the end of the week we will have every member of the band in custody. One of them will be sure to 'squeal'—they always do—and his evidence will send the rest to Sing Sing for a

term of twenty years; that is, if we can get them before Recorder Hackett. Ah! he's the judge for these rascals. Leave me your card, and in two hours' time I will call on you and report progress."

Chester gave him the firm card.

"If you look up this lawyer first, and find that his office is on Center street, as you suppose," he said, "it will not be much out of your way to call at the office; and I think you will find Mr. Shaw there, and a consultation with him would not be amiss."

"By no means. I should like to meet him of all things. He can give me details which you cannot; but you may rest assured of one thing, Mr. Starke: I shall enter heart and soul into this business."

"Your reward will be commensurate with your success."

"Ah! that don't trouble me. You will never grumble at my terms, I promise you."

Chester shook hands with him heartily, and then departed.

CHAPTER XXII.

A PRESENTIMENT OF DANGER.

KATE VEHSLAGE came into the room, with her basket of provisions on her arm, for she was the caterer for the small family in the tenement-house.

Etta, who had just spread a snowy white cloth over the table, preparatory to the evening meal, knew by the sound of the closing door that something was the matter with Kate, and so she turned around to look at her.

Kate's face was flushed, and her sharp black eyes were glistening angrily.

"Well, what has put you in a pet now?" asked Etta, composedly.

These ebullitions of temper on the part of Kate never discomposed her. She was too much accustomed to the outbreaks of that vivacious young female.

"The contemptible sneak!" cried Kate, putting her basket down, with a thump, on the side-table. "I've seen him again!"

"He—who?"

"That man with the false face; don't you remember the night I was going for the medicine for Mr. Shaw?" She sunk her voice suddenly here, and glanced at the door of communication between the apartments. "Is he in there?" she added, in a hoarse whisper.

"No; he went out, and has not yet returned. How about this man? Where did you meet him?"

"Right here, at the door."

"Our door?"

"No; the street door. I was coming home with the things for tea, and there he stood at the door, with a smirk on his face, a face just like a terrier dog's. 'I believe you are Miss Vehslage?' says he. 'That's my name,' says I, never letting on that I remembered him, and I am not ashamed of it. 'Couldn't I sell you a sewing machine,' says he, 'on the easiest terms, and a guarantee of steady work until it's paid for?' 'No,' says I, as short as you please. But he's one of those chaps that won't take no for an answer. 'There's two of you,' he goes on, 'to run it, Miss Ward and yourself.' 'How did you know there was a Miss Ward here?' says I. 'Lord! you need not get huffy about it,' says he, showing his teeth, and grinning like a pleased monkey. 'There's no secret about it, is there, that you and Miss Ward—Miss Henrietta Ward—are living together, and doing sewing for your living?' 'How do you know that?' says I, snapping him up again. 'Why the butcher says so, that's all,' says he; 'I hope there's no offense in my mentioning it. Come, try one of my machines. I'll send you one around this evening, if you say so.' Then I told him it was none of his business if Miss Henrietta Ward was living with me; that we didn't want a sewing machine any way, and that we would not buy one of him if we did, and left him standing there and came up stairs."

"You did not say anything to him about Mr. Shaw?" inquired Etta, anxiously.

"Oh, no;

"If he's got any sense he won't. But some men are such awful fools, particularly when they are in love, you can never tell what they will do! Would you say anything to Mr. Shaw about this?"

"No; why should we? I do not consider the matter of sufficient consequence."

"Well, you know best. Now I'll help you get the supper ready for him."

Peter Shaw soon arrived. He was in very good spirits. He had just come from his office where he had held a consultation with Frank Ray, the detective, who had been introduced to him by Chester Starke.

He had been much pleased with the detective. He liked his looks and his manner of expressing himself. He thought him a stout young fellow, with a keen wit, and great energy of action. A man who might be depended upon in the most trying emergency.

He looked upon him as a valuable aid in his design against the False Faces; and then there was Chester Starke, equally strong in limb and just as reliable, and shrewd Ossian Plummer, the best friend he had ever had.

The destruction of Edgar Skelmersdale and his villainous associates seemed inevitable.

Peter Shaw rubbed his hands pleasantly together as he sat at the supper-table, and Kate passed him his cup of tea.

"Ah! what a comfort it is to see two young and smiling faces about one!" he cried, never considering that their smiles were but the reflection of his own, for they found his geniality infectious. "Well, dear girls, we shall soon leave this house for more comfortable quarters. I don't know why I should say that either, for I have really enjoyed an astonishing degree of comfort here. What I mean to say is, that we shall leave it for a more respectable and cleaner neighborhood. My friend Ossian has secured a house for us."

"Ossian!" exclaimed Kate. "That's a queer name."

Peter Shaw chuckled pleasantly.

"Yes, and it's a queer man that bears it," he replied. "He's an old friend of mine, and a tried and trusted one. You'll soon see him, and I want you to like him for my sake."

"We may like him for his own," returned Kate. "Is he young and good-looking?"

"Neither. He's of middle age and very plain."

"Oh!" ejaculated Kate, disappointedly.

"I thought I should get up a match between you and him," continued Peter Shaw, his eyes twinkling mischievously,

Kate snuffed the air disdainfully.

"Thank you," she rejoined; "but I may not like his style."

"He's very rich," said Shaw, artfully.

"Hum!" cried Kate, with quite a change of tone. "I should like to see Mr. Ossian."

Ossian Plummer—Ossian is his first name." Peter Shaw stirred the contents of his tea-cup and glanced at Etta's placid face. He was brimful of his fun that evening. "And then there's my other friend, and partner, I've picked him out for Etta," he continued.

"For me?" asked Etta, opening her large blue eyes widely in surprise.

"Oho!" exclaimed Kate. "He's going to fix us both! Why, he's just like a father to us."

Peter Shaw smiled benignantly.

"That's just what I intend to be," he answered. "You'll never know the want of a father while I live."

Etta returned his smile affectionately. Her heart had fully determined the relationship between them. But Kate's curiosity was greatly exercised by the mention of the other friend and partner.

"What's he like?" she cried, in her vivacious manner. "Is he middle-aged, too, and homely, and rich, and what's his name?"

Peter Shaw laughed at this string of questions.

"How curious you are!" he rejoined.

"Not a bit! only I'd like to know."

"You shall. His name is Chester Starke; he's from Vermont, as tall and as straight as a pine tree, and young and good-looking."

"Oh, my!" ejaculated Kate. "Why, didn't you pick him out for me? He's just my style!"

"I thought he was better suited for Etta. You are dark complexioned and so is he. Two darks don't go well together, don't you see? It doesn't answer to have a husband and wife look too much alike."

"Oh! doesn't it?" responded Kate, dubiously. "Is he rich?" she added, suddenly.

"No."

"Then he can't have Etta—that's settled. No one but a rich man can marry her. That face of hers is worth something."

"Oh! you've settled that between you, have you?"

Etta smiled, and answered.

"No, she has settled it for me. That's Kate's great idea, that my face is to make my fortune."

"And so it will," returned Peter Shaw; "though not perhaps in the way that she imagines. However, that would not have been any very strong objection against Chester Starke, as he will undoubtedly be a rich man in the course of a few years. His interest in the business will make him so."

"And what will it make you?" asked Kate, slyly.

"Well, I shall have enough to live on comfortably."

"I should say so. I only wish I had the quarter of it."

"Take Ossian Plummer, then," he suggested, roguishly. "He's worth more than a quarter."

"Oh! let her have the other one," cried Etta, entering more into the spirit of the jest than Kate did. "At all events, give him the chance to choose between us."

"That's fair," said Peter Shaw.

Kate tossed her head.

"Oh, is it?" she exclaimed. "What kind of a chance would I stand alongside of her? But that's just like her! She never thinks of herself. She'd let anybody crowd her one side sooner than make any fuss about it."

"Ah, yes, I have known such a disposition before," answered Peter Shaw, and there was a plaintive cadence in his voice. "Well, well, as Etta says, let Chester Starke decide for himself. You will soon see him. Ossian has rented a furnished cottage for me on Eightieth street—a cosy little house with a nice large yard in front, with trees, shrubbery and a grape-vine. Then it is only a short walk from Cen-

tral Park, so that one can take a pleasant stroll there of an afternoon. It is quiet and secluded there, and we shall not be disturbed I think. There will not be anyone left in the city to trouble us if my plans only work right; and I think they will—I think they will." He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hands together pleasantly. "We shall all be gathered together under one roof-tree then," he continued, "and you young people will have an opportunity to get acquainted."

"Won't that be nice?" exclaimed Kate.

"Yes; I think we shall all be very happy there," said Etta. "When shall we go?"

"In two or three days," answered Peter Shaw. "I cannot fix the time exactly now. There is something that I wish to do first. Matters are in good train and the affair will be speedily settled, I hope. You can content yourselves here for a few days longer?"

"I should say so," replied Kate, "considering how long we have lived here. But I shall not be sorry to leave this house, shall you, Etta?"

"Indeed I shall not; but I will do whatever Mr. Shaw thinks to be best."

"Of course; so will I."

Peter Shaw smiled.

"What docile young ladies you are," he said. "You place great trust in me, and yet I am almost a stranger to you."

"It seems as if I had known you for a long time," answered Etta.

"So it does to me!" followed Kate.

Peter Shaw smiled again, saying:

"Well, girls, your trust in me will meet with a rich reward; you'll never be sorry for it."

"I am sure we shall not," responded Etta, earnestly.

A strong longing arose in Peter Shaw's heart to clasp her in a fond embrace, and own her then and there, but he restrained that feeling. He was too old in the world's experience not to know that the course of human events can never be forecast, that the best laid plans often prove futile, and that a simple accident will often mar the most skillfully contrived scheme.

"No, no," he told himself, "I will wait. Her life is too precious to me to be subjected to the slightest risk. Let me clear these villains from my path, and then I can dispense with all concealment."

Having drank his tea, Peter Shaw pushed his chair back from the table, and arose to his feet.

"I am going into my room to read the evening paper," he said. "Then I am going out, and I shall not return much before midnight, so you had better not sit up for me. I shall take the key of my door with me, so as not to disturb you."

"Is it safe?" asked Etta, earnestly.

"Oh, yes; don't be under any alarm. I shall be with two friends, who are to meet me by appointment. I shall be perfectly safe, and so will you, for I shall have this house watched during my absence."

The fact was that, trusting to his disguise, he had resolved to aid Chester Starke and the detective in their search that night for the house that contained the council-chamber of the False Faces.

Their design was to watch the entire block from corner to corner and observe if any of the parties they suspected entered either house in the row.

On leaving the house Peter Shaw walked to the Bowery and took passage on a horse-car to Eightieth street. Ossian Plummer was already domiciled there, and he had thought it best to go for Chester and pass an hour or so there, as they did not purpose commencing their watch until about ten o'clock at night.

Frank Ray, the detective, was to be left to his own discretion, and they were to meet him in front of the row of tenement-houses during the night.

He found Chester and Ossian in the cosy front basement, reading, while they awaited his coming.

"This is nice," he said, glancing around the well-furnished apartment. "This selection does credit to your taste, Ossian. The girls will be delighted when I bring them here."

"I wish they were here now," rejoined Ossian.

"Oho! you are anxious to see the lively Kate, are you?" he cried. "Are you equally anxious, Chester?" he added, turning to him.

"I think the young ladies would be a great addition to our society here," answered Chester.

"It isn't because I am anxious to see Kate," said Ossian, with a grim smile. "She'll never worry my peace o' mind. It's your daughter I'm anxious about—"

"I hope you are not going to set your heart on her, Ossian?" interrupted Shaw, roguishly.

"Don't be a fool, Peter! I aint a-going to set my heart on any woman—it don't run in my way. I'm thinking you ought to have brought your daughter, and the other girl, up with you this evening. The house is all ready for them. Why not bring them now—this evening, as well as any other time?"

"Because I wish to destroy this infamous band of villains first. It's handy for me to be there, and I find it handy to have them there just at present."

"Perhaps it is," replied Ossian, slowly; "yet still I've got a feeling as if something was going wrong."

"A presentiment of evil?"

"Yes; I s'pose that's what you call it. I've no book learning to make my meaning plain; but it pears to me that something's going to happen."

Peter Shaw grew thoughtful as Ossian thus expressed his misgivings.

"But what can happen?" he asked.

"I don't know; but I've got that feeling, and I can't shake it off."

"My precautions are thorough," continued Mr. Shaw. "I have always worn my disguise whenever I went into the street. I have carefully watched to see if I was followed, but nothing has aroused my suspicion. I go constantly armed, and always on the alert for danger, and I do not think it possible that I can be taken by surprise. The girl's existence, or residence, cannot be known to the scoundrels, and they think me dead—and will think so until I have them securely bound in the meshes of the law. Really, I do not see on what side peril can reach us."

"Nor can I," said Chester Starke.

Peter Shaw shook his head gravely.

"The worst of these perils are that you never do

know where they are coming from until you're struck," he responded. "Remember how these villains trapped you into their power once."

"I do; and I'm not likely to forget it in a hurry."

"You may not be so fortunate as to escape a second time."

"True; but you must also remember that I was unconscious of danger that time, and walked blindly into the trap prepared for me, as one stumbles into a pitfall in the darkness. Now I am prepared to meet a snare at every turn, and cannot be taken unaware."

They conversed in this manner for some time, and Ossian's presentiment of evil was greatly weakened by Peter Shaw's confident assurances. Chester Starke took little share in the discussion, but what little he did say showed that he was entirely of Peter Shaw's way of thinking.

At length Shaw announced that he considered it a proper time to depart down town on their expedition.

To his surprise Ossian expressed his intention of accompanying them; but Shaw made no objection.

"Are you armed?" he inquired, as he examined his revolver, and Chester Starke performed a similar operation.

"No, I don't want no pistol," replied Ossian.

Peter Shaw shook his head dissentingly.

"You ought to have a revolver, Ossian," he said. "I told you to get one, same as Chester. Why didn't you?"

"What would be the use of it to me?" answered Ossian, with his grim smile. "I never fired a pistol in my life; and if I had one I would be sure to miss the man I fired at and hit some one else, perhaps you, or Chester."

"That would be awkward!" cried Chester, laughing.

"I'm not a child to play with edged tools," continued Ossian.

Peter Shaw appeared to be impressed with these words.

"I guess you are right, Ossian," he answered—"as you generally are. If you don't know how to use a pistol it might in your hands be more dangerous to friend than foe. But you might take along that stout walking-cane of mine; it would serve for a club at a pinch."

"Yes, I might make some use of that," replied Ossian.

So the cane was brought into requisition, and the three left the house, Ossian carefully locking the door after them, and putting the key in his pocket.

"The colored servant has gone to bed—she sleeps in the little room over the kitchen at the back of the house," he said. "And as it may be late before Chester and I get back, I'll take the key, so we can let ourselves in without disturbing her."

"Very good. It will be late," rejoined Peter Shaw. A bell began to toll. "There's the nine o'clock bell; it will take us three-quarters of an hour, or more, to get down to Broome street. Come along."

They passed through the little garden to the sidewalk, Ossian being last, and pausing to see that the gate was properly secured after them. Nothing could disturb his methodical habits.

They walked swiftly toward Third avenue, hailed the first down car, and went on to their destination.

They got out on the Bowery at the corner of Broome.

As they reached the sidewalk, a man joined them—a man dressed like a laborer, with an old, slouchy, felt hat on his head.

"All right—here you are!" he said.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT MIDNIGHT.

THE surprise they all experienced in being approached and addressed in this unceremonious manner was dissipated upon discovering that this person was the young detective, Frank Ray.

"Ah! you didn't know me," he continued, when he had revealed himself to them. "Pretty good get up this for the occasion? not, perhaps, that I needed any, but I always make it a point never to work up a case in my own proper person. When I go out for an airing, I don't want these rascals to point me out and whisper: 'There goes a detective!' I don't care for any such notoriety."

"I suppose not," answered Chester Starke. "Now, what success have you met with?"

During this conversation they walked along Broome street.

"The very best," replied Ray.

"That's good," exclaimed Peter Shaw, heartily.

"Oh, I couldn't very well

"Oh, I've spotted it, beyond a doubt. I'll show it to you."

They turned into Chrystie street.

"They've got it fixed splendid," continued Ray, as they walked along. "There's a doctor's office on the ground floor, and I've an idea that he's one of them. There might no end of strangers enter the house as his patients, don't you see?"

"A cunning device," said Shaw; "but the leader of this gang is no common man. He was born in the midst of wealth, and received a liberal education. Nature endowed him with the form and bearing of a gentleman, but he has sadly abused her gifts. It is strange to me that he should have become such a villain—I cannot understand it," he added, musingly.

"Nor anybody else," replied Frank Ray. "All rascals always appear to me to be fools—to be deficient in their mental capacities. The theory of the matter that I have formed, sir, is this: there's deformity of mind as well as body. Men are born with misshapen limbs, why not with misshapen brains, or without any reasoning power in their brains? It does not appear to me that any man would willfully do wrong knowing the sure penalty that must attend that wrong doing."

This philosophy surprised Peter Shaw.

"You seem to have studied this subject, my young friend," he replied.

"I speak from a wide experience of human kind," rejoined the detective, in his modest way. "I have seen much of the world in many lands, and I have used my eyes."

"To some purpose, too. I think Chester made a good selection in you."

"It was no selection at all," said Chester. "I took him on the recommendation of his chief. It was a mere accident."

"A lucky one for us, I'm thinking!" cried Peter Shaw.

"I'll try to make it so," responded Frank Ray. "I must make my recommendation good, if nothing else. But don't be surprised at anything that happens. In looking for one thing men often find another. I found something once that way myself, and in a most singular manner."

"Indeed! Pray, how was that?" inquired Peter Shaw.

"It's too long a story to tell you now, but when we get through with this affair I'll give you the particulars, if your wish still holds good to hear them."

It certainly will, I assure you."

They had paused, in imitation of Ray's action, and he was surprised to feel Ossian Plummer grasp him suddenly by the arm, and peer curiously in his face. He bore the scrutiny composedly.

"What is it, my friend?" he asked.

"Nothing—only I thought I'd like to take a good look at you, so I'd know you again," answered Ossian, dryly.

"Are you satisfied?" rejoined Frank Ray, laughingly.

Ossian released his grasp, but Ray felt the bony fingers quiver in a manner that denoted a strong emotion before he did so, and this circumstance, trivial as it was, bewildered him.

"Yes, I am perfectly satisfied," replied Ossian. "Peter, you can trust that man."

"Thank you! An odd genius!" Ray whispered to Shaw when Ossian moved away a few paces.

"Yes, and as honest as he is odd," replied Peter Shaw. "Don't mind him; it's his way."

Frank Ray appeared to grow thoughtful over this little incident; but whatever his thoughts were he kept them to himself. This young man could be very discreet when occasion required.

"As you stop, I suppose we are near the house?" said Peter Shaw.

"Directly opposite," answered Ray, rousing himself from a kind of reverie. "That's it, with the sign, gold letters on black—Doctor Watervliet."

"You think he is one of the gang?"

"I do; though I have no doubt he is a *bona fide* doctor, and takes what patients he can get. His profession is an excellent cloak. It gives him a respectable occupation in the eyes of the police. I have an idea that we shall find all of them following some calling."

"Yes, there's the lawyer with the odd name—what was it, Ossian?"

"Ceiba Selkreg."

"Oh, yes; I've spotted him; we can lay our hands on him whenever we want him," said Ray. "But it might be difficult to prove his connection with the gang, unless we catch him with them."

"We must do so," answered Peter Shaw. "We must capture the entire party while they are engaged in their villainous mummery. We will fix on to-morrow night for that."

"They may not be here then."

"What makes you think so?"

"Let us walk on, and I'll tell you," said Ray; "we shall attract attention if we stand any longer here."

"You are right."

They proceeded in pairs up the street, Peter Shaw and Ray first, and Ossian and Chester following close behind, so as to hear what was said. They passed numerous persons on the sidewalk, but no one paid any attention to them.

"There's been several very daring robberies committed lately, by a band of masked men," continued Ray, "and I have an idea that these fellows are the party that did them."

"I shouldn't be surprised," answered Peter Shaw.

"Were these robberies in the city?"

"No, not lately; they seem to have been operating lately in the country towns. On the night of the 27th of April last, several burglaries were committed in Collinsville, Connecticut. The village post-office and savings-bank, which are in the same building, were entered, and the former was robbed of some scrip; but the safe of the bank resisted the burglars, and in their efforts to force it they raised an alarm. This caused them to fly. They stole a horse and wagon from the stable of the village tavern, to aid their flight. A week afterward the horse was found hitched in the woods near Walcottsville, almost starved to death; but it was impossible to determine in what direction the robbers had gone."

A bold exploit, but not productive of profit to the perpetrators."

"I might recount a dozen daring attempts of the same nature, though differing in their results; for in some of them they reaped a rich booty, but it is no necessary, nor do I think you would be enter-

tained by the recitals. If this should prove to be the same gang, and the very nature of their exploits would indicate that some such men as this Skelmersdale and the lawyer are at the head of the organization, it would be a feather in my cap to effect their capture."

"Then you shall have that feather. I see you think that they have met to night to arrange some country expedition?"

"That is my idea exactly."

"And they may not meet in their rendezvous to-morrow night?"

"They might not; and yet they might."

"Let us trust to the might. We can arrange every thing for their capture. If they are there to-morrow night we'll take them, if they are not we'll wait until they are. We shall know whether they are in the house or not before we enter it."

"Of course. Your idea is a very good one sir. Let's leave it so decided."

They had reached Second avenue during this conversation, and Ray turned here and led the way to the Bowery.

"Shall we go back to the house?" he asked.

"You and I will, as I have got a room close by there," answered Shaw; "but we need not keep Ossian and Chester out of their beds any longer. They can take a car here and go home. I should like to see what time they will leave the house; not much before twelve, I fancy."

"I should say not."

"There comes a car, Chester, hail it."

"I'm in no hurry to get home, sir."

"Nor I," added Ossian.

"And if you think you should require our aid—"

"I know I shall not. I'll come to the office the first thing after breakfast."

Peter Shaw signaled the car and it stopped.

"There, get aboard, and good-night."

Chester and Ossian stepped upon the rear platform of the car, and it proceeded on its way up the avenue.

Peter Shaw and Frank Ray walked down the Bowery to Delancy street and turned into it proceeding to Chrystie, and passing the tenement-block of houses.

The secret order of False Faces was their topic of conversation as they walked along at an easy pace.

Peter Shaw gave the detective a full account of his experience in the council-chamber, and his narrow escape from death. He was inclined to be very communicative with this young man. It may be that Ossian's assertion, that he could trust him, had something to do with this, but there was that in the speech and manner of the young detective that inspired confidence. Peter Shaw had conceived quite a liking for him.

They had walked back and forth down the street, going down on one side and coming up on the other, and watching the door that led to Doctor Watervliet's office until the clock struck twelve.

After this hour the passers-by began to diminish, and soon their footfalls alone awoke the echoes of the street. But a light still gleamed from Doctor Watervliet's office.

The street was now entirely deserted. A policeman came through one of the cross streets, paused on the corner above them and struck his club against the curbstone, giving the signal of "All's well." Then he passed on his beat.

But, was all well?

Peter Shaw and Frank Ray thought so, and yet none of the False Faces had come forth.

The clock struck one. The light in Doctor Watervliet's office was extinguished.

"They are coming," said Ray; he and Shaw being opposite the house on the other side of the street when the lamp went out. "Let us go up to the corner, cross over, and meet them as they come out. They may drop some chance words that will give us an inkling of what they are about."

"A good idea."

As the members of the order came from the door they divided in couples, some going one way and some another.

Edgar Skelmersdale and Ceiba Selkreg went up the street, meeting Peter Shaw and Frank Ray coming down. They paid no attention to them, however, thinking them two belated laborers going home.

"Didn't I tell you I could do it?" they heard Ceiba Selkreg say.

"Yes; and it was neatly done. I think the game is in our hands now."

They passed on. Peter Shaw paused before a door, for this had happened at the portal of the house in which he had taken up his temporary residence.

"They are up to something, sir, as I told you," said Frank Ray.

Peter Shaw was thoughtful.

"Yes, yes, evidently," he answered. "What game does he mean? It would be strange if Ossian's presentiment of evil should be verified. He is very shrewd. Somehow I can but think the game has something to do with me and mine. It was Edgar Skelmersdale. That man has been a blight on my life."

"And his companion was the villainous lawyer?"

"I suppose so—I do not know—I never saw this lawyer—that is not to know him. He must be the one called Nightshade, who had the deed that they wished me to sign," he added, musingly.

"Is this where you have taken up your quarters?"

"Yes; it is only five doors from the doctor's you see."

Frank Ray laughed, saying:

"Quite handy! I suppose you feel like turning in now?"

"Yes; meet me at my office at nine o'clock to-morrow morning, or rather to-day, for the new day has begun."

"All right; I will be there. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

Frank Ray walked quickly up the street, and turned the corner. Peter Shaw stood in the doorway listening to the sound of his retreating footsteps.

The policeman returned upon his beat, paused again at the corner, and again struck the signal, "All's well."

Peter Shaw accepted it as a good omen.

"All's well!" he echoed; "then let me go to bed and sleep."

He entered the house and ascended the stairs,

groping his way up in the darkness by the aid of the banisters.

Before the door of the girls' room he paused and listened. All was still within.

"Sound asleep long ago," he murmured. "All's well!"

He felt the way along the hall to his own door, unlocked it, and entered.

He struck a light, and then went to the door that led into the adjoining apartment and listened.

He heard the loud breathing of one in a sound slumber.

"All's well!" he said again, disrobed himself, blew out his lamp, and got into bed.

He was soon asleep, fatigued by the unusual exercise he had taken that night.

But he would not have slept so soundly if he had known what had taken place within the girls' room while he was absent.

The False Faces had met for action that night, but it was not a bank robbery that they meditated. They had been called together to aid Ceiba Selkreg in his project of placing the girl known as Henrietta Ward in the power of Edgar Skelmersdale.

The little lawyer's plan was made known and approved by the chief.

Six of the order were selected for its accomplishment: the chief, Nightshade, Henbane, Aconite, Creosote and Arsenic.

It was a device of the little lawyer's to give each member of the band, except the chief, the name of some poison or noxious drug, and by these names each member was invariably called in the council-chamber. Thus every member sunk his own individual identity in the order.

It is sufficient for our purpose to know that Nightshade represented Ceiba Selkreg and Henbane Doctor Heinrich Watervliet.

The doctor was a skillful physician, and a man of much learning and research, but of dissolute habits and indolent. He had drifted easily and naturally into crime. His knowledge of medicine and surgery made him an invaluable member of the order, as their encounters with the police often resulted in dangerous wounds.

In his cabinet of curiosities the doctor kept the revolver-bullets that he had extracted from the limbs and bodies of his confederates.

In the present undertaking the doctor provided himself with a bottle of chloroform and a sponge. He had often used this volatile essence upon their nocturnal expeditions.

The rest armed themselves with knife and revolver, as was customary, though resistance was scarcely looked for in this instance; and each wore the false face and the long black cloak that gave such a phantom-like appearance to the figure.

Thus equipped, they ascended to the roof by the skylight.

Silently they glided along, one by one, headed by the little lawyer.

The stars twinkled down upon them, giving these dark, shapeless figures a ghostly look—only they were somber specters, and not robed in the traditional white.

Nightshade—the little lawyer had chosen a good name for himself—glided along until he reached the roof of the house in which the girls lived.

The scuttle was raised and thrown back, but as noiselessly as possible, and one by one five descended through it. The sixth was left as a sentinel on the roof.

The city bells tolled the midnight hour as they descended through the scuttle.

"It is the hour when spirits wander," remarked Ceiba Selkreg, jocosely, as he heard the bell.

He produced a dark-lantern from beneath his cloak, and pushed back the slide. Aconite did the same. Two streams of light were thrown before them, showing the halls and stairs. They proceeded with the utmost caution.

On the fourth floor Creosote was left as a sentinel. If any of the tenants there should look from their doors, he was to scare them into silence by the exhibition of his revolver. Aconite was left on the third floor for a similar purpose.

Only Ceiba Selkreg, the doctor and Edgar Skelmersdale went to the door of the girls' apartment. Ceiba picked the lock with a skill that showed experience and practice in the burglar's art.

They entered the room. The doctor saturated the sponge with the chloroform. The door of the bed-chamber was open.

One gleam from the lantern that Ceiba Selkreg carried showed two heads, one with black, the other with golden hair, reposing upon the pillow.

"Sound asleep—now, doctor," whispered Selkreg.

The doctor crept noiselessly into the bed-chamber, and held the sponge to the nostrils of the sleeping girls.

"All right!" he said. "There's no danger of either of them awakening now."

never felt like this before. Etta's up before me—why it must be late. Etta! Etta!" she called.

There was no answer. She scrambled out of bed and looked into the other apartment.

"Why, she isn't here!" she cried, surprisedly. "She's gone out—and the fire isn't built—no signs of breakfast, for the table isn't set. What time is it? Nine o'clock! Good gracious! Whatever made me sleep so? And the sleep hasn't done me any good either! Yaw! I feel as if I could go right to bed again. It's a wonder Mr. Shaw hasn't been for his breakfast before now. Etta must be in his room. Well, I'll just hurry up the breakfast."

She dressed herself in all haste, kindled a fire in the stove, and put on the kettle to boil. Then she went to the door that led from one set of rooms to the other and knocked.

Her first knock being unheeded she repeated it loudly.

"Holloa!" came the voice of Peter Shaw, like one who had been suddenly aroused from a sound slumber.

"Why he can't be up yet!" exclaimed Kate, in perplexity. "Ain't you up, sir?" she asked him.

"Not yet."

"Why it's after nine o'clock!"

"Is it? Ah! I was up late last night. I'll be ready for breakfast in a quarter of an hour."

"Very well, sir."

Kate re-entered the room which combined the offices of kitchen, sitting-room and living-room generally, and began to set the table for breakfast, but she did this with a languid movement, in strong contrast with her usual briskness. Her limbs felt rigid and her brain was clouded. This strange feeling perplexed her sadly.

"What's come over me?" she muttered to herself, in bewilderment. "I don't feel a bit good. And where's Etta? Where's she gone? I never knew her to go out in that way without saying anything before."

Here she knocked a cup off the table, with her elbow, and broke it.

"Drat it! there I go!" she exclaimed, irritably.

"Oh! what's the matter? My head feels as heavy as lead. I do wish Etta would come! Wherever can she have gone? Well, we can wait for her. I'll run out and get the bread and milk, and some eggs. Perhaps she'll be back by the time I am."

Cheered somewhat by this reflection, she took her basket and went out.

When she returned she found Peter Shaw seated in her room. He had not put on his disguise, as he only used that when he went abroad. He looked very pleasantly at her, and seemed in a contented frame of mind.

"I bought the morning paper for you," she said, taking it from the basket and giving it to him.

"Thank you," he replied; and began to unfold it.

Kate took off her hat and shawl, and busied herself in preparing breakfast.

"Where's Etta?" asked Peter Shaw.

"Hasn't she come in?" returned Kate.

"No. I thought she went out with you."

"No, she didn't. I can't imagine where she's gone."

Peter Shaw lowered his paper uneasily.

"Didn't she say where she was going?" he inquired.

"No; here's your coffee, sir, and I boiled you some eggs."

"Very good." Peter Shaw moved his chair up to the table, but he did not appear to have any appetite for breakfast. "Did Etta ever go out so before?" he asked.

"Never. I don't know what to make of it. I don't know where she's gone, and don't know when she went."

Peter Shaw stared at this.

"Why, did you not see her go?" he cried.

"No; she went before I was up."

"Before you were up?"

"Yes; I overslept myself this morning, and when I woke up she was gone."

"Was anything the matter with you last night? Did you take any laudanum or paregoric last night?"

"Lord, no, sir! What made you think that?"

"I thought I smelt either one or the other of those drugs as I came through that little room."

"We've never had anything of the sort in the house."

Peter Shaw stirred his coffee absently.

"Do you think she has gone out to visit a neighbor?" he began again.

"Not she, sir. She never has anything to say to the neighbors. She keeps herself to herself: and always did."

"It's very strange!" He opened an egg abstractedly. "I ought to have been at the office before now; they are both waiting for me there, but I don't like the idea of going while Etta is absent. Something may have happened to her."

"But what can have happened to her?" cried Kate, nervously.

"I don't know," he answered, absently. "Ossian had a presentiment of evil—I did not think much of it then; if it had been Almira now I might have done so, knowing how keen-witted she is." He was talking to himself now, and Kate listened to him amazedly. "Could they have known that she was here and spirited her away?"

He started excitedly to his feet, crying:

"My child, my child, my darling one! am I to lose you so soon after finding you?"

"Good Lord! is he going crazy?" muttered Kate, apprehensively.

He caught the muttered words.

"No, no, my good girl," he answered, "though I have been so, and suffered tortures almost unendurable; but my brain is steadier now than it has been for years. We must find out where Etta has gone, and speedily!"

"I'll go with you!" cried Kate.

She darted to a chair and seized a shawl, hastily wrapping it over shoulders.

"Oh, my!" she shrieked.

"What's the matter?"

"This isn't my shawl—it's Etta's. And there's her hat hanging in its usual place. Why she hasn't gone out at all; she must be hiding somewhere to frighten us."

Kate dashed into the little room. But she was

back in a moment, with something clutched in her hand.

"She isn't there!" she cried. "But look here! I picked it up on the floor. It don't belong to either of us, I'll take my oath of that—so how came it there?"

Peter Shaw took a small sponge from her hand.

It exhaled a sickly odor—he knew it well.

"Great heavens! Chloroform!" he gasped.

"There's villainy here!"

At this moment there came a knock at the door.

"Oh! there she is!" cried Kate, never stopping to think that Etta would enter without knocking.

She darted eagerly to the door and threw it open.

Two men appeared there.

"Does Mr. Shaw live here?" inquired one.

"Come in, Chester!" cried Peter Shaw; "I am here."

Chester Starke and Frank Ray entered the apartment, and Kate closed the door, surveying the newcomers curiously.

"You have come in good time," continued Peter Shaw. "But how does it happen that you did come?"

"You promised to be at the office at nine o'clock," replied Chester Starke; "and as you did not come, knowing how punctual you generally are, I was fearful that something might have happened."

"Something has happened—something very serious. My daughter—"

Frank Ray pointed to Kate.

"Oh! she can be trusted—she is Etta's friend. This is Kate—Kate Vehslage. Kate, these are Chester Starke and Mr. Ray."

Kate made her best courtesy in acknowledgment of the introduction.

"Oh! what splendid young men," she thought, all in a flutter. "And he didn't say anything about this other one. I'd rather have him than the Ossian—what's his name?"

Chester only glanced at Kate; he had expected to see the golden-haired daughter. Indeed, his visit had been cunningly contrived, Shaw's want of punctuality furnishing the excuse, to be presented to Etta a little in advance of Shaw's intention. He was proportionally disappointed at not finding her there.

"What of Miss Etta?" he demanded, eagerly.

"I fear she is in the power of these villains."

"Great Heaven! But how can that possibly be?"

Peter Shaw held the sponge toward Frank Ray, who took a snuff at it, asking: "Do you know what that means?"

"Chloroform—that's the dodge!" replied Ray, at once. He turned to Kate, saying: "How did your head feel when you woke up this morning?"

"Awful!" responded Kate.

Ray nodded his head to Peter Shaw.

"Dosed them both so they wouldn't wake up," he continued. "This is some of Doctor Watervliet's work."

"I think so," rejoined Peter Shaw. "But at what hour was she spirited away? It could not have been while we were on the watch."

"No."

"It must have been after I came home."

Frank Ray shook his head at this.

"I think not," he answered. "Remember we saw the band leave their rendezvous; and recollect the words we overheard. They had no particular meaning to us then, but they have now in the light of your daughter's disappearance."

"You are right."

"Oh! you are Etta's father, and I didn't know it!" cried Kate; "and she didn't know it either!"

"I think she had a strong suspicion of it," rejoined Peter Shaw.

"She never told me so!"

"Miss Etta is discreet evidently," said Frank Ray. "It appears to run in the family."

"That's as much as to say I'm not," muttered Kate, looking askance at the handsome detective, as he appeared in his own person on this occasion, not being then in pursuit of any one. "I think I like the other one the best."

"You think then that Etta had been abducted by these men when they passed us last night?" inquired Peter Shaw.

"Such is my idea, sir. What else could the words of this man Skelmersdale, that the game was in his hands, imply?"

"I think you are right; but then how did they take her from the house? That I cannot understand."

"She was never taken out by the door," answered Frank Ray.

"How then?"

"How did you come into this room?"

Peter Shaw glanced at the fireplace in a bewildered manner.

"Why, you don't think they took her up the chimney?" he cried.

Frank Ray smiled at this question.

"Oh, no, hardly that," he replied. "I meant they may have come from the roof of their house to this. Isn't there a way up to the roof?" he asked Kate.

"Of course," she answered. "The people in the front rooms hang their clothes up there when they wash. There's steps leading up, and a scuttle door."

"Is that door fastened at night?"

"I don't know; 'pear to me it ought to be, though. We in the back rooms have nothing to do with it, as we have our pulley-lines, from the windows across to the wall of that house—but somebody ought to fasten that scuttle every night, I think."

"But nobody does," returned Frank Ray, with a smile. "What is everybody's business is nobody's business. That's the way they came, sir," he continued, again addressing himself to Peter Shaw. They came through the roof, down the stairs, picked the lock of this door—they could easily do that with a skeleton key—chloroformed the girls and carried Etta away in an insensible condition."

Peter Shaw was impressed by the force of this reasoning.

"I think you have made a shrewd guess at the truth," he rejoined. "One thing, however, puzzles me, how did they discover that Etta was my daughter? They must have done so, or they would not have troubled her?"

"Evidently."

"Do you think they knew of my escape, or that I was residing here?"

Frank Ray shook his head in the most positive manner.

"Decidedly not!" he replied. "If they had, it would have been you who would have been missing instead of Etta. They could have chloroformed you just as well while they were about it; and I think it's lucky for you that you were not in your room while the abduction was in operation."

"Why so? I might have prevented it!" cried Peter Shaw, with kindling eyes.

Frank Ray shook his head again.

"You would have found the odds too heavy against you, and the attempt would have cost you your life. But, as you say, how they contrived to discover Etta's relationship to yourself is a mystery. I confess that it baffles my penetration. They must have got the information some way."

"Oh! that's what that chap was after!" exclaimed Kate, suddenly.

"What chap?" they all cried, in an eager chorus.

Kate described her interview with the pretended sewing-machine agent.

"Hal! what was he like?" questioned Peter Shaw.

Kate described him.

"It was the lawyer—Skelmersdale's villainous tool! Did he make any inquiries about me?"

"No."

"He did not ask who occupied the front apartments?"

"No; never said a word about them."

"Strange! It is evident that they are yet ignorant of my escape."

"It looks decidedly like it," affirmed Frank Ray.

"I cannot understand, then, how Etta's identity was revealed to them."

"Oh! that fellow has been prowling around this neighborhood before," cried Kate.

"Ah! you have seen him before?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"The first night you came here."

Kate proceeded to relate her singular adventure with the man with the false face.

"It is very plain that this is the lawyer, Cebra Selkreg, and establishes his connection with this band of villains beyond a doubt."

"I think so," added Chester, who had listened attentively to this discussion.

"And so do I," said Peter Shaw. "But the motive for Etta's abduction is by no means plain."

"I can make it so," rejoined Frank Ray. "You dead, your son missing, supposed to be dead also, Etta would be your sole heiress. They mean to coerce her into a surrender of the property."

"Ha! you are right!" cried Peter Shaw with conviction. "Do you think they hold her a prisoner in that house?"

"Yes, they can scarcely have had time to remove her as yet."

The Masked Band.

three patients at once (and such he took them to be) was an unusual occurrence to the doctor. And then they were of a better class than the patients who generally presented themselves at his office.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he inquired, and his accent betrayed his German origin.

"You can give us the girl that you and your companions abducted last night," answered Frank Ray.

The doctor started back as if he had been struck, and his features assumed a ghastly, greenish hue. He thrust his hand behind him, under the skirt of his coat.

"No you don't!" cried Ray; and he sprung upon the doctor, and pinioned his arms to his side. "Just take the revolver out of his pocket, will you, Mr. Starke?"

Chester did so, and Ray released the doctor, who sputtered a string of oaths in German. He always swore in his native tongue.

"What does he say?" inquired Chester, stepping back with the doctor's revolver in his hand.

It was a seven-shooter, a handsome and serviceable weapon.

"He's blessing us in high Dutch," replied Frank Ray, coolly. "Let him bark; he can't bite—you've drawn his teeth. Now look here, doctor," he continued, addressing himself to the incensed physician. "I am a detective—there's my badge." He displayed it. "We know what hand you had in the abduction of the girl last night, for we found the sponge you left behind you. Ah! that starts you, does it? She's in this house, and we've come for her. Where is she?"

The doctor glared upon them like a wild animal bearded in its own den.

"I don't know anything about any girl," he answered, sullenly. "She is not here. Go and look for your girl somewhere else."

"He lies!" cried Peter Shaw.

"Of course he does!" responded Ray. "But we'll have the truth from him. Come now, doctor, no nonsense—we mean business!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SCHEME MARRED.

"LEAVE my office, or I will call the police!" sputtered the doctor.

The keen eyes of Frank Ray saw that he was frightened, though he put on an assumption of courage.

"Call away, and you'll be toted to Ludlow street jail in a jiffy," answered the detective. "We'll search your apartments and see what we can find."

The doctor backed up against the door leading to an inner apartment in a suspicious manner. This movement was not lost upon Frank Ray.

"Oh! you've got her in there, have you?" he cried.

"No—no—she is not here, I tell you," answered the doctor, in a kind of growl.

Frank Ray caught him by the collar and swung him around from the door with the greatest ease.

"Stand out of my way if you don't want to get hurt," he cried.

The doctor showed his yellow teeth like a famished hyena, but he did not offer any further resistance, evidently satisfied of its uselessness.

"There's a lady patient there, who was brought to me last night," he said, remonstrating. "She is suffering from an attack of catalepsy."

Frank Ray laughed scornfully.

"You'll suffer from an attack of catalepsy one of these days," he returned. "You will have a suppression of motion when you come to be hung up with a rope around your neck!"

The doctor showed his teeth again in a manner that indicated he was not pleased with the allusion.

Frank Ray opened the door, which led into a little dark bedroom. The opening of the door, however, threw considerable light within and revealed a female form extended upon the bed.

"Here she is!" he cried.

"My child! Etta!" exclaimed Peter Shaw, seeing the pale face, about which the golden hair hung disorderly.

He sprung into the room. Chester Starke also approached the door attracted by a strong curiosity.

"She was brought here last night by strangers to me," cried the doctor. "I know nothing about her."

"Tell that to the marines!" answered Ray. "We shall make so bold as to take her away."

"She is senseless—she scarcely seems to breathe!" exclaimed Peter Shaw, apprehensively, from within.

"Then he's chloroformed her again this morning," said Ray. He turned fiercely upon the doctor, adding: "I have a great mind to put a bullet through your ugly carcass! And I would too, only I don't wish to cheat the hangman of his due."

The doctor retreated in alarm.

"How shall we take her away?" asked Peter Shaw, perplexedly.

"Wrap her in the counterpane, and I'll carry her to the house," answered Ray.

"Will that not attract a crowd?"

"Hardly, in so short a distance. I'll risk it. Gather up her clothes; I see them on a chair. She was brought here in the same fashion that we must take her away."

"Do you intend to make any charge against me?" asked the doctor anxiously. "The young lady has not received any injury since she has been here—and it was not my doing, her coming here."

"Umph! do you think us fools to believe that?" returned Ray.

"You can't prove anything against me," insinuated the doctor.

"Perhaps not," answered Ray, who had his motives for lulling the doctor into a sense of security.

"Don't take away my revolver—I am offering no resistance," urged the doctor.

"Shall I give it to him?" asked Chester, and he looked reluctant to do so.

"Give it to me."

Ray took the revolver, sprung back the handle and removed the cartridges.

"There," he said, and gave the doctor the unloaded weapon. "You're not the kind of man I would like to trust. But mind, no tricks, or you'll suffer. When will the girl awake?"

"In two hours," answered the doctor submissively. "But how did you discover that she was here?"

he added, with a curiosity that he could not control.

"Never you mind; that's our affair," returned Ray, shortly. Then he called out to Peter Shaw: "Are you ready, sir?"

"Yes."

"Very good! Let me have her."

Ray entered the chamber and returned with Etta, closely wrapped in the counterpane, in his arms.

"I will cover this over her face when we reach the street," he said, "and walk fast. People mind their own business pretty well in New York, and I don't think anybody will trouble me. At all events, I shall not stop to answer any questions. Come."

Ray bore the insensible form of Etta swiftly into the street, and Peter Shaw and Chester Starke followed him.

The people they met on the sidewalk stared surprisedly at Ray and the strange burden he bore, but they could not exactly determine whether he was carrying a sick person or a dead body, but they knew he had a human shape in his arms; the counterpane could not conceal that.

Several turned and followed them. Ray reached the door of the house in which Etta lived and went swiftly up the stairs. Peter Shaw followed him; but Chester Starke paused and confronted the little crowd that had gathered at the door. He thought he might satisfy them and send them away.

A string of questions burst upon him at once.

"What's the matter? Anybody killed? Somebody run over? Another murder? Drunk, I guess? Is it a boy, or what?"

"The old man's daughter was taken very sick at the doctor's, and he had to get a friend to bring her home?" replied Chester.

"Oh! Is that all?"

The crowd dispersed in a manner that indicated they thought they had wasted their time, and Chester, smiling to himself, walked up-stairs.

"Here she is!" said Ray, bearing Etta through the door that Kate held open for him. "Did you know we were coming?"

"Lord, yes, I've had my head out of the front window ever since you've been gone," answered Kate. "I saw you when you came out of the doctor's house. Bless her dear heart! here she is again." She bustled about and placed the rocking-chair for him so he could deposit his burden in it. "Why, she's asleep, and oh! how awful pale she is. Oh, she isn't dead is she?" she added, sinking her voice to a scared whisper.

"No, no, she is still under the influence of the chloroform—she'll come to presently."

"She does look deathly," said Peter Shaw, as he joined them.

"She looks like a sleeping angel!" exclaimed Ray, fervently.

"Oh, Lord! now he's smitten with her," murmured Kate, despondently. "There'll never be any chance for me until she's married off!"

Chester Starke now came in and closed the door after him.

"There she is, Chester; what do you think of her?" asked Peter Shaw.

Chester gazed earnestly in the pale face, framed by the masses of golden hair, and Kate watched him eagerly.

"If the eyes were only open I could tell better," he answered, somewhat evasively; "but I think she is a very charming young lady."

"Ah, yes, he's fixed, too," murmured Kate. "I never did see the like! Old and young, they're all alike! They've only to set their eyes on her to fall in love with her."

Kate was right. Though it has been said that "a face with the eyes shut is like a house without windows," yet Chester saw enough in that face, even with its closed lids, to convince him that it was the face of all others that he could love.

He felt that his destiny would henceforth rest with her.

Leaving the rescued Etta to the care of her friends, and she was fortunate in having so many and such strong ones, we will return to Doctor Watervliet's office.

That skillful, but unprincipled practitioner, was deeply chagrined at what had taken place. He knew that Edgar Skelmersdale and Cebra Selkreg would be very angry with him. But he shrugged his shoulders as he consoled himself with the reflection that it could not be charged to any fault of his.

He had been taken utterly by surprise, and mortal man could not have withstood the odds brought against him.

He anxiously awaited their coming, and momentarily expected them, for they had arranged to come in a carriage, and convey Etta to a house in the outskirts of the city, Selkreg providing it, where she could be kept in close captivity until her marriage with Edgar Skelmersdale could be consummated.

The scheme was well arranged, as all their schemes were—but what scheme was ever yet proof against accident?

When the doctor heard a carriage roll up to the door and stop, he knew that they had come. He smiled grimly, despite his own anxiety, in anticipation of the bitter disappointment that awaited them.

"What can they do about it?" he asked himself, with a shrug of the shoulders. "It was not my fault."

They came in, Selkreg in advance.

"Well, how is our fair patient?" he cried, gayly.

"Has she awoken?"

"Not yet," answered the doctor. "I applied the chloroform again to keep her insensible."

"Good. Well, we may as well take her away. I've got the house all ready for her reception. Edgar, you'll have to put her in the carriage—you are stronger than I am."

Selkreg advanced to the door of the little room and pushed it open.

"Holloa! she isn't here!" he cried.

"Not there?" exclaimed Skelmersdale.

"What have you done with her?" questioned Selkreg.

The doctor smiled, but his exhibition of mirth was ghastly one.

"She's gone!" he answered, falteringly.

"Gone?"

"What do you mean?"

"Her friends came here and took her away."

"The devil!" ejaculated Selkreg, in dismay.

Edgar Skelmersdale uttered a fearful imprecation.

"Explain yourself, doctor," he added. "What friends? How came they here? How did they know that she was here?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders in a helpless manner.

"I don't know," he answered. "There were three of them, two young men and one old, and one of the young men said he was a detective. He took my revolver from me, and withdrew the charges. See, here it is."

"The fiend himself seems to be working against us!" exclaimed Edgar, moodily.

"Well, it certainly does seem as if the Old Boy had a finger in the pie," said Selkreg. "I don't understand this business at all. Never was a trick neater done—no clew was left, I thought, by which the girl could be traced here."

"I dropped the sponge there that I used for the chloroform," observed the doctor, deprecatingly, as if he thought that might have something to do with it.

"That doesn't matter; that would not give any trace of the way we came or the way we went," rejoined Selkreg. "It looks very much to me as if we had a traitor among us. Can one of the band have betrayed us?"

"There is not a member of our order that dare turn traitor," answered Edgar. "He would know that no earthly power could shield him from our speedy vengeance."

"That's so. This is a tangled-up affair, and I can't untwist it. Give us the full particulars, Doc. Let me sift the evidence."

Selkreg put the doctor through a rigid cross-examination as if he had been a witness upon the stand, and elicited all he knew, and a description of the three men who had taken Etta away.

The description of the old man—that being the designation that the doctor applied to Peter Shaw—greatly perplexed the little lawyer.

"I can't imagine who this old party could be," he commented, musingly.

"Why, he was the girl's father," rejoined the doctor.

If a bombshell had suddenly fallen and exploded between Skelmersdale and Selkreg, they could not have been more astonished than they were at these words.

"Her father!" they both exclaimed simultaneously.

"Yes; he called her his child."

Selkreg and Skelmersdale exchanged glances.

"The devil!" ejaculated Selkreg.

"Can it be possible?" cried Skelmersdale.

"It don't seem possible!" Selkreg turned again to Watervliet. "See here, Doc, haven't you made a mistake? Do you mean to say it was the same man we put down the chimney?"

The doctor seemed puzzled by this question.

"Why, no, it didn't look like him," he answered, reflectively. "This man had long white hair and a full white beard."

"Then it wasn't him!"

"Yes, it was," cried Edgar, positively.

Selkreg turned a surprised look upon him.

"What makes you think so?" he demanded.

"My heart tells me so. Genni Bartyne is alive, and the father and daughter, thanks to us, are re-united."

"How can that be?" asked the bewildered lawyer.

He was very much chagrined to find that Skelmersdale should find a solution to this puzzling matter when he could not.

"Things happen strangely in this world," replied Edgar. "I noticed last night, but without paying any particular attention to it, that the broken chimney down which we thrust Genni Bartyne was on the roof of the house in which these girls were living. He must have fallen into their room, and could not have been much injured."

"Well this just beats me!" ejaculated Selkreg. "But how could he tell she was his daughter, for she couldn't have known it?"

"Could he not have recognized her from her strong resemblance to her mother, as I did?"

"That's so! But why didn't he break his neck when he fell? I say, Doc, wasn't that enough to kill him?"

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"And I am known as your legal adviser, and I appeared with you at the wells when we went after the property," said Selkreg. "We three are in for it, but the rest, I fancy, are unknown. But that doesn't matter: we are the brains of the order, and the others are merely machines that obey our directions. We'll have to keep secluded. You'll have to leave here, Doc—and take a quiet lodging somewhere where you are not known. I shall retire to my country residence for a while, upon the classic banks of the Bronx river, and you had better go with me, Edgar."

"I will; we must disappear from the city, and leave no traces behind. We'll take a short rest while we devise some scheme to enrich us, since we have failed in the Bartyne business. One bold scheme for profit, one daring blow for vengeance, and then I am done!"

"Ecce signum!" responded the little lawyer.

When Etta returned to consciousness, she found herself in her own bed, and Kate sitting, sewing by the bedside.

She opened her eyes languidly. Her head troubled her, her brain throbbed with a dull pain, and her eyelids felt as if they were weighted with lead.

"Dear me, how strange I feel," she murmured.

"And no wonder—you've had a very long sleep," answered Kate.

"Have I?" rejoined Etta, dreamily. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Oh! why didn't you wake me?"

"I thought it would be a pity, you were sleeping so soundly."

"I can't think what should have made me so sleepy."

"Did you dream anything?"

"No, I don't remember—dear me! my ideas are dreadfully confused. Did Mr. Shaw ask for me at breakfast?"

"Yes; he missed you very much."

"Did he?"

"Lord, yes—he loves you just like a father."

"Yes—yes!"

"And why shouldn't he?"

"Why?"

"Because he is your father!"

Etta struggled up to a sitting posture in the bed.

"Did he tell you so?" she cried.

"He did."

"Oh, I knew he was my father; I could not mistake the feeling that led me to love him."

"He said he thought you knew him."

"But he would not proclaim himself my father for fear these villains who had sought to kill him should seek to injure me."

"Well, you are just a witch for guessing."

Here the twelve o'clock bell rung throughout the city. Etta listened to it surprisedly.

"Why, it surely isn't twelve o'clock, is it?" she cried.

"It surely is," answered Kate, laughingly.

"Why, how I have slept!"

"I've left the coffee-pot on the stove for you; I thought you might like a cup before you went."

"Went! Where?"

"We are going to the house in Eightieth street today—don't you remember what Mr. Shaw said? The carriage will be here at one o'clock. Mr. Ray has gone for it."

"Mr. Ray; who's he?"

"Oh! I forgot that you didn't know anything about him—he's the detective that Mr. Shaw brought here."

"A detective—why did he bring a detective?"

"Well, he didn't exactly bring him here, either; but then he was the means of his coming here; and a very nice-looking young fellow he is; not a bit like a policeman; and Mr. Starke is here, too—and he's a nice-looking young man, too!"

Etta laughed musically.

"What a treat you must have had, Kate!" she cried. "Two nice-looking young men to talk to at once. Strange things must have happened while I was asleep."

"They have—stranger than you think for!"

"What do you mean?"

"There, dress yourself, and I'll help you. I've packed up all the rest of your things and mine, ready for a start; dress yourself, and I'll tell you all about it."

And Kate's tongue rattled on, delighted, for ten minutes, as she informed Etta of all that had taken place.

Etta was literally amazed at this revelation. Then she went into the front room to be clasped in her father's arms in a fond embrace, and presented to Chester Starke, in these words:

"My daughter Henrietta, Chester—Henrietta Bartyne."

"Bartyne?" echoed Chester, surprisedly.

"Yes; that is my true name—Peter Shaw no longer, but Genni Bartyne. No more disguises—no more weakness. I have bold and unscrupulous foes, I know, but I will meet them as boldly, face to face, trusting in that Providence which has so far sustained me!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"OUT OF TOWN."

ETTA'S eyes lingered pleasantly upon Chester Starke's frank and manly face. He was there with her father's indorsement, and that was sufficient to incline her mind favorably toward him.

She felt that she could accept him as a friend, for her father's sake—and a little for his own; for she was favorably impressed by his appearance.

You may imagine that this was a case of "love at first sight" between them. Perhaps it was. But I think all cases of love begin at first sight, only some, as in all other cases, are more violent than others. The nature of the attack depends upon the temperament and disposition of the patient.

Kate now insisted that Etta should have a cup of coffee and a little lunch.

"For you must feel faint," she said.

Etta acknowledged that a little refreshment would not come amiss, and they all went into the kitchen of the other apartments.

By the time Etta had finished her slight repast, Frank Ray arrived with the carriage.

He was duly presented to Etta, who looked at him with as much interest as she had at Chester Starke. Indeed Kate, whose keen eyes were ever on the watch, thought her favor was extended more to Ray than to Chester.

"I do believe she's going to like him the best," she told herself. "Well, I've one consolation—there's two of them, and she can't have them both!"

It was very evident that Kate had fully resolved upon the conquest of one of these young men.

The trunk that held Etta's and Kate's wardrobes in common was taken down-stairs, and the whole party followed it, Kate being last, and taking the keys with her.

It was arranged that she was to return upon the morrow, dispose of the furniture to some second-hand dealer, keeping the proceeds as her perquisite, and surrender the keys to the landlord.

They entered the carriage, Ray taking a seat with the coachman, and were driven away.

The tenement-house was abandoned for good. Henceforth the heiress of Genni Bartyne was to live in the condition that befit her birth.

They conversed very pleasantly as they rode along, though Etta took little part in the conversation. She leaned back in her seat, resting her head against the cushion, with half-closed eyes, still feeling a lassitude from the effects of the chloroform, but an expression of supreme content rested upon her pale features. Kate, however, made amends for her silence by a vivacious volubility, which Chester Starke found somewhat annoying.

He sat beside her on the front seat, Genni Bartyne and Etta occupying the back seat, and Kate observed that his eyes rested almost constantly upon Etta's face, and all her small-talk could not divert his attention from it. His rejoinders to Kate's remarks were very absently given.

Genni Bartyne was in the best of spirits, and he laughed and joked with Kate, telling her that she would soon see Ossian Plummer, and she must make a conquest of his heart. The conceit of mating the gaunt superintendent to this mercurial girl greatly pleased Bartyne.

"You're just the wife he wants," he cried. "You're just the woman to stir his sluggish blood into activity."

Thus, between them, they about monopolized the entire conversation; but the ride proved a very pleasant one to Chester and Etta, although they had so little to say.

The house in Eightieth street was reached, and the whole party alighted, to the great surprise of Ossian Plummer, who met them at the gate. The colored visage of the servant was also to be seen as she protruded her head from the basement door, and rolled the whites of her eyes curiously, as much surprised as Ossian himself at this unexpected arrival.

Ray took the trunk from the driver and dismissed the carriage, and he bore it into the house after the others, as Ossian ushered them.

"Here she is, Ossian; here's my daughter!" cried Bartyne, proudly, as they entered the cosey little parlor. "Etta, this is the best friend your father ever had."

"A lovely child!" exclaimed Ossian, with unusual fervency; and to the surprise of all he advanced toward Etta with outstretched arms, with the evident intention of embracing her.

But he checked himself suddenly, pausing awkwardly, as if remembering himself, and blushing like a woman.

Genni Bartyne laughed merrily.

"Oh! kiss her, Ossian, if you wish to," he cried. "Etta won't mind, for you'll be like another father to her."

"I will kiss him!" exclaimed Etta. "I will show him that I appreciate his friendship to you, father."

And she did kiss him, to the intense envy of Chester Starke.

Ossian returned the kiss with all a father's tenderness, and he held the fair young girl for a moment fondly in his arms, gazing earnestly in her face.

"God bless you, child!" he said, in a voice that trembled with emotion. "The possession of such a daughter is enough to gladden any father's heart. You're proud of her, Peter—I can see that—and well you may be. Oh! I can feel what joy must fill your heart. Is she like her mother?"

"Her very image!" answered Bartyne.

Ossian laid his hand caressingly upon Etta's head, as if to call down a blessing upon it.

"You are found, child—found, pure and innocent; may Heaven always keep you so!" he exclaimed, earnestly.

Though they were inclined to laugh at this little episode, at first, the deep earnestness of Ossian's manner checked their mirth, and gave solemnity to the scene.

Etta released herself blushingly, but the praise of her father's old friend fell very pleasantly upon her ears. As she drew back Kate advanced to Ossian, deeply impressed by what he had said, exclaiming:

"You may kiss me, too, if you like."

"Thank you, I'm not particular," responded Ossian, dryly; and he turned away.

"Oh!" murmured Kate, a little resentfully.

"Never mind; if he won't, I will!" cried Ray, roguishly; and he gave her a resounding kiss.

"Oh!" murmured Kate, again, but not at all resentfully this time.

"What's the matter? Did it hurt you?" inquired Ray, with mock concern.

"Oh, no; but I think you are rather free on short acquaintance."

A hearty laugh from the rest followed, and then Bartyne said:

"Now we must get things in shape. Ossian, you summon your colored aid, and let her show the girls to their room. Let her take their trunk up."

"I'll do that!" cried Ray.

Ossian fastened his gray eyes keenly upon the detective's face.

"Pears to me you're mighty obliging, young man," he said.

"I always try to be," answered Ray.

Ossian's gray eyes twinkled strangely.

"I feel as if I could kiss you, too," he rejoined.

"I beg you won't," returned Ray, and he retreated, as if he really thought Ossian was in earnest.

Ossian chuckled to himself, went into the hall, called the colored woman, whose sudden appear-

ance denoted that she was not very far off when she was called, and her anxiety to make herself useful.

The girls were shown to their room, which was the front chamber up one flight of stairs, and Ray carried up their trunk.

"He's as strong as a mule!" remarked Ossian, in his dry fashion.

"And as brave as a lion!" returned Bartyne. "You'll like him better, Ossian, when you come to know him better."

"So'll you, Peter!"

"No doubt—no doubt!"

The men gathered in the parlor again.

"Now to business," began Bartyne. "Did you close the office, Chester?"

"No, sir; I left Jim in charge. He can be trusted to take any new orders that may come. In fact, we cannot supply any new customers, as you know. It is as much as we can do to supply the old ones."

"True; but we must go down to the office and put things in shape; this affair has unsettled matters. Then these villains must be attended to. Do you think it advisable to make a descent upon them to-night?" he inquired of Ray.

"Most decidedly. If we don't find them there to-night, we never will," answered the detective; "and I'm afraid it is too late as it is."

"Perhaps it is, but we'll make the attempt. Ossian, we will leave you here in charge."

"Are you going without your disguise, Peter?" asked Ossian, for Bartyne had cast it off.

"No more disguises for me, Ossian. The villains must know I am alive by this time. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," responded Ray. "Doctor Watervliet could tell them that. How cheap they must have felt when they arrived and found Etta gone. Ha! ha! ha!"

His laugh was so infectious that they all joined in it.

"Well, it will be some little time before they can trace us here," said Bartyne; "and we must try to trace and secure them first. We won't be back here until late, Ossian."

"Very well."

"Come!"

"One moment," said Ossian; "I want to speak to this young man first."

"You haven't another presentiment of evil, eh, Ossian?" Bartyne asked, uneasily.

"Oh, no; I see nothing but good before us now. You go on, and wait for him at the gate."

Bartyne and Chester Starke left the house, wondering at this singular proceeding on the part of Ossian Plummer.

"Well, my friend, what have you to say to me?" asked Ray, when they were alone.

Ossian laid his hand impressively upon the young man's arm.

"I know who you are," he said.

Ray stared in astonishment into the gray eyes of that hard-featured face, and the gray eyes smiled kindly upon him.

"The deuce you do?" he exclaimed.

"I do!" responded Ossian, nodding his head, significantly.

Ray laughed, crying:

"Well, that's odd! for a week ago I didn't know myself. You're a long-headed, keen-witted individual."

"I'm a Yankee, and we're given to guessing. Do you mean to tell me?"

"Of course; but not yet."

"I thought so!" exclaimed Ray, pausing at the door.

"What is it?" inquired Bartyne.

"Do you perceive any change here?"

Bartyne surveyed the house.

"The blinds of the doctor's windows are closed," he answered.

"Is that all?"

Bartyne looked again.

"I don't perceive any thing else," he replied.

"Where's his sign?" inquired Ray.

"Why, it's gone!"

"Yes; and the doctor's gone, too!"

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, sir, the birds are flown. I thought they would not stop long here. They are wide awake, sir; they were not going to give us a chance to catch them. Our only hope was to surprise them. Our coming for Etta gave them the alarm."

"But if we had left her an hour longer in their hands they would have spirited her away to some retreat which we might have been weeks in searching for."

"Very true, sir."

"I had rather that they should escape than that any harm should have befallen her."

"You were right, sir; so had I; but, I confess, I feel a strong anxiety to trap these rascals—and I shall never feel satisfied until I do."

"You think then that they have abandoned this house?"

"Undoubtedly, sir. Don't you see the bill: 'Apartments to Let'?"

"Really, you appear to notice everything," answered Bartyne, surprisedly. "I did not attach any particular significance to that, as there are bills on both the houses upon either side, as you see."

"Oh, yes, there's always some apartments to let in these kind of houses, and so the bill 'To Let' becomes a chronic attachment to the door-post. But I observed in this bill that the apartments to let are the very ones occupied by the doctor and the False Faces; and there is a newness to this bill which shows that it has been renewed to-day."

"Upon my word! your discernment is of the keenest kind!" exclaimed Bartyne, approvingly. "I never should have noticed that."

"It's my business, sir. The smallest trifle sometimes leads to a great result."

Ray rung the bell vigorously, and they could hear it through the door sounding loudly in the hall.

"What are you about to do now?" inquired Bartyne.

"Make some inquiries to see if those fellows have left any clew by which they may be traced; I hardly expect it, though."

The door opened, and the slatternly female, who had charge of the premises, appeared.

"Can you tell me where Doctor Watervliet has moved?" inquired Ray, in his most winning manner.

"He's gone out of town," replied the female.

"Out of town?" echoed Ray; he had not expected such an answer as this. "Do you know which way?" he added.

"Yes. He told me that he had got a Government appointment to go to the navy yard at Pensacola, as they have got the yellow fever very bad down there."

"Ah! thank you. I see that the upper floor is to let."

"Yes, the doctor had that as a surgery—I think he called it. Would you like to look at it, sir?"

"What's the rent?"

"Twelve dollars a month."

"Hum! no—I guess we won't trouble you—it's a little too high—"

"Why, that's cheap."

"I allude to the altitude of the floor," answered Ray, laughingly. "I'm afraid it's too high up in the world for us. Thank you; good-day!"

Ray walked away and Bartyne followed him.

"Do you think this doctor has really gone to Pensacola?" he inquired, when they had walked some little distance from the house.

"Not he! That's an ingenious device to throw us off the scent. He is still in the city, and I have a shrewd suspicion that his confederates are here also. But that nest is empty. There is no use making any descent there to-night. They've gone, bag and baggage."

"There's no doubt of that. They moved with a surprising celerity. I don't see how we are going to trace them."

"That's for me to find out. They may baffle us at the start, but when the law begins to chase a party of scoundrels in earnest it's bound to run them down at last."

"What do you purpose to do next?"

"Hunt up this lawyer, Selkreg. I'm just going to his office now. I'd like to ascertain if he has gone out of town also."

"Shall I go with you?"

"Well, yes, it's on the way to your office, and it will satisfy your mind, and save me the trouble of making a report to you."

They proceeded to Center street and stopped at the dilapidated wooden house that bore Cebra Selkreg's sign upon it.

"Here's the shyster's office," said Frank Ray.

Going up the dingy stairs they found the door of Selkreg's office locked, and a card tacked upon it bearing this inscription: "Out of town."

Ray smiled as he saw it.

"I thought so!" he cried. "I've got a game of hide-and-seek before me."

They descended to the street.

"What next?" inquired Bartyne.

"You may as well go to your office, sir, and I will return to head-quarters," replied Ray. "We can do nothing to-night, and I must change the arrangement. All you have to do now is to go on with your business as usual, and leave the affair in my hands. When I discover anything I will let you know."

On this they separated.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FIEND MASK.

Two weeks passed swiftly away, and Genni Bartyne heard nothing from the detective. It was evident that he had not succeeded in discovering the lurking places of the False Faces.

In this time Etta and Chester saw much of each other, and their first favorable impressions were strengthened.

Kate Vehslage, in her own mind, decided that it was a plain case of love at first sight, and sighed, enviously, for the return of the handsome young detective. But as he did not come, she endeavored to divert her mind by getting up a flirtation with Ossian, and was snubbed in such a grim manner that she drew back utterly defeated, and highly incensed, with a lasting spite against the gaunt superintendent; but her disdain did not affect Ossian Plummer's peace of mind.

He had suggested to Genni Bartyne that he should now return to the oil wells, there being no further occasion for his services in the city. Bartyne, however, was not disposed to let him go.

"Remain with us yet, Ossian," he said. "We have not reached the end. Everything goes on as it should at the wells. You receive letters regularly from Almira, you say, and her reports are favorable, are they not?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then wait a little longer here—wait until these False Faces are brought to justice, as I feel they speedily will be. This young man is on their track, and I have great faith in him."

"So have I!"

"He'll catch them yet!"

"I trust so!"

And so Ossian Plummer remained, nothing loth to stay.

The cosey parlor was lighted by two gas-jets, covered with globes of glass, which projected from the wall, between the two windows, and on either side of the large mirror.

These windows were on a level with the floor, and led out upon a veranda. This veranda was some five feet above the garden, and was reached by a flight of steps in front of the door.

Though early in October, the night was quite warm—almost oppressively so, for the sky was cloudy with the presage of a coming storm, and neither moon nor stars shed their luster through the gloom.

In various positions in the parlor our family group was seated. All was bright within, in strong contrast to the gloom without.

Chester Starke and Etta sat side by side, he holding an illustrated periodical in his hand, and turning over the pages for her examination. Kate occupied a chair on the other side of Chester, near enough to take an occasional glance at the engravings, but her attention was chiefly engaged by a peculiar kind of needle and a ball of white cord, with which she wove a sort of lace, or edging, for trimming.

Ossian Plummer sat in an easy-chair in the corner, apparently intent upon the perusal of a magazine, but his eyes wandered ever and anon from the page, and rested smilingly upon Chester and Etta. They even condescended to take Kate's form in, as if the grim superintendent was comparing the two girls together; and the contrast between them now was more strongly marked than ever.

Their wardrobes had been greatly augmented since their arrival in the new house; both were nicely dressed, and in a becoming manner.

But Kate lacked that air of ease and refinement which seemed to pertain naturally to Etta; though some men might have preferred the bold beauty of her face, with its sharp black eyes and irregular features, to the modest and retiring look, verging almost upon timidity, so characteristic of Etta's face, with its fair complexion, dove-like eyes, and radiant hair.

Genni Bartyne, seated in a rocker by the center-table, with the evening paper upon his knees, studied the young people attentively, and less covertly than Ossian Plummer.

His eyes lingered pleasantly upon Etta's fair head, and then strayed to Chester Starke's dark locks, and frank face. He read the gentle, yielding disposition in one face, and the strong and self-reliant will in the other.

"They were made for each other," he reflected. "They are just suited—a splendid couple. And they are finding out each other's hearts rapidly. Well, let it be so. I would not ask a better husband for my girl. Chester shall take the place of the son I have lost. Shall I ever find him? I fear not. He must be dead."

This reflection sent him into a deep reverie. Etta and Chester conversed over the pictures, Kate putting in a remark vivaciously at every opportunity.

Something she said provoked a laugh from Etta and Chester, and roused Genni Bartyne from his reverie.

"That's a smart girl," he mentally commented. "A free and happy disposition that takes no thought of care for the morrow. The world rests lightly on her young shoulders. I've tried to get up a match between her and Ossian, but it doesn't work at all. He seems to have become a woman-hater, and to grow more grim and gaunt as he grows older."

His eyes again rested upon Etta's face, with a clinging look of affection.

"How like her mother she is!" he murmured. "Heaven shield her from so bad a fate as hers was!"

With this thought his memory traveled backward and reviewed the bitter past.

Ossian Plummer would turn a leaf, read a few lines, and then his restless eyes wandered about the room, taking in the face of each of its occupants before they settled down upon the page again.

The little clock upon the mantel-piece struck the hour of ten, sounding it in clear, bell-like notes.

The darkness grew more intense without. The wind sighed gently in at the open window.

"How close it grows!" exclaimed Genni Bartyne.

"I think we are going to have a storm."

"Shouldn't wonder," returned Ossian.

His chair was in the corner, near one of the windows, and he glanced through it. He made a quick motion as if about to spring from his chair, but a second thought restrained him.

He raised the magazine before his face as if to read again, but he did not do so; he merely used it as a screen to hide his face while his eyes watched the veranda with the keenest interest.

He was confident that he had seen some object protruded above the rail of the veranda, and it appeared to him that that object was a man's head. But he was not sure. He watched to satisfy his doubts, to secure the spy upon their privacy, if his doubts should prove correct.

Ossian's vision was of the keenest, and his vigi-

lance was soon rewarded with results. Again the object arose above the veranda rail, coming up out of the gloom below and beyond.

He could not distinguish that it was a head—but such a strange one that he was fascinated by a kind of awe as he gazed upon it. It was of a dark red hue, surmounted by two sharp horns of a bluish color, not unlike steel, and the features were those of a grinning fiend.

For a moment Ossian wondered what this singular apparition could mean, but when he saw an arm extended and something at its extremity glistening in the light that streamed from the windows, he divined the murderous purpose.

With a loud cry he sprang to his feet and threw himself before Genni Bartyne. A pistol-shot was heard without; there was a flash of fire, and Ossian fell at the feet of the aroused and startled Bartyne.

Etta and Kate both screamed in alarm. Chester Starke plucked his revolver from his pocket—he had worn it constantly since the day of Etta's rescue—and dashed out upon the veranda.

He heard the sound of retreating footsteps, and the gate close. He fired two shots at random, and then ran down the steps in pursuit.

After her first alarm, Kate ran out upon the veranda. She came back with a mask in her hand; a red mask representing a fiend's face, with horns projecting from it.

Chester came back from his useless pursuit. He did not find any traces of the assassin in the street, nor did he think he had been injured by the shots he had fired.

He found Genni Bartyne supporting Ossian's head upon his knee. Ossian's face was ghostly, his eyes closed, and there were red blood-stains upon his shirt bosom.

"Is he hurt?" inquired Chester, anxiously.

"Yes, yes, and badly too, I fear," answered Bartyne, anxiously. "Here's blood upon his breast. Poor fellow! he threw himself before me, and received the bullet intended for me. Let me open his shirt and see if I can find the wound."

Bartyne undid Ossian's cravat and collar, and opened his shirt at the breast, seeking for the wound from which the blood was slowly oozing through on the white linen.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Bartyne, in sudden amazement.

They were all startled by his manner.

"What is it?"

"Is he killed?"

"Have you found the wound?"

These were the questions that burst simultaneously from their lips.

"No, no—it is not that," replied Bartyne, excitedly.

"But—but—"

He hesitated strangely.

"But what?" they all cried.

"This is not Ossian!"

"Not Ossian?" they echoed.

What could he possibly mean?

"No; it is Almira!"

"Almira?"

"Yes; Almira, dressed in Ossian's clothes."

"I thought she was a woman when she kissed me!" exclaimed Etta.

"I might have known she was, when she wouldn't kiss me!" added Kate.

They all gazed curiously at the wounded woman. Bartyne was the first to recover from the shock of this great surprise.

"Quick, quick, Chester! run for the nearest surgeon!" he cried. "If there is a chance to save her life, it must not be neglected."

"By no means!" answered Chester; and he caught up his hat and hurried from the house.

Almira moaned feebly, and made a fluttering movement with her eyelids.

"Heavens! I fear she is dying!" cried Bartyne, tremulously.

"That accursed gang of False Faces!"

"Yes, and here's one of them that they left behind!" cried Kate, showing the mask, which she still clutched in her hand.

All stared surprisedly at the fiendish face which she exhibited.

"Ha! this may lead to something," exclaimed the policeman.

He took the mask and examined it.

Chester Starke now arrived, accompanied by a surgeon. He had been fortunate enough to find one at home who resided near them.

The crowd again surged up to the door. The policeman placed the mask upon the table and went out to drive them back. They retreated as before. He took his station at the gate to prevent any further intrusion, and the throng, finding that they were not to be permitted to know any thing about the matter, gradually dispersed.

The surgeon knelt down beside the motionless form of Almira to make an examination of the wound.

"A woman!" he exclaimed, surprisedly, looking up in Bartyne's face.

He was evidently puzzled by this discovery.

"Yes, yes; is the wound fatal?" replied Bartyne.

"I can not say until I probe it. But she still lives, and you know the old saying, 'while there's life there's hope.'"

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Bartyne, fervently. "I would not have her die for a million of dollars! Save her life, and your fee shall be a rich one."

"I'll do my best. Let's get her in a bed as soon as possible."

"Certainly. Kate light the gas in her room. Chester, you and I can carry her up."

"Gently—gently—she's lost blood enough already," urged the surgeon, as Kate sprung quickly up the stairs, and Bartyne and Chester raised Almira from the floor.

With all tenderness the wounded woman was conveyed to the chamber above, which she had occupied when wearing her brother's name and garments, and placed upon the bed. Then Bartyne and Chester retired, leaving Kate and Etta to assist the surgeon.

Bartyne and Chester returned to the parlor.

"You have had a narrow escape, sir," said Chester.

"Yes, my boy; I owe my life to her. What devotedness!" answered Bartyne, with deep feeling. "Oh, that she may live, so that I can repay her!"

"I have always considered Almira an oddity; but who would have dreamed of such a freak as this?"

"If we had not been simpletons we might have guessed it! The advice she gave us was too shrewd to come from Ossian: I thought he had improved, and this explains it. But they are so much alike in form and feature that I was deceived."

"I confess I was, completely. But where's our friend Ray? It appears to me he has been outwitted by these villains."

"He could scarcely think they would make so bold an attempt."

Chester shook his head.

"They appear to be bold enough to attempt anything, sir," he answered. "We have rested in fancied security; we must not give them another opportunity to steal upon us unawares. We must take energetic measures against them for our own safety."

"We will! From this night we will pursue them to the bitter end. One life may be already forfeited to their malignant hatred. They shall not have another. This mask, undoubtedly, was used to conceal the assassin's features. It may lead to his discovery. Are there any marks upon it to tell where it was purchased?"

Bartyne took up the mask, and examined it carefully.

It was of thick pasteboard, and had some strange characters on the inside. There was a dot, a cross, the figure 3, then the letters M S, then two scrawls covered with defacing lines, rendering them illegible.

"There is little to guide us there," said Chester, who had looked over Bartyne's shoulder as he made the examination.

"Nothing whatever," rejoined Bartyne; "but what does it matter? I know whose hand fired the death-shot aimed at my life. I am as sure of it as I am that I am standing here. It was Edgar Skelmersdale! And, as Heaven hears me, when next we meet I will not spare him!"

"I can understand the bitterness of your feelings against him, but do not you slay him; give him to the gibbet, fit punishment for such a wretch as he has proved himself to be."

The surgeon now came down-stairs, and diverted their thoughts to another subject.

"Ah! doctor! well, well, how's your patient?" cried Bartyne, eagerly. "Will she live?"

"I think she will."

"God be praised!" exclaimed Bartyne, reverentially. "Oh! this is beyond my hopes."

"Good news, indeed!" added Chester.

"I have extracted the bullet; I found it lodged against the collar-bone; and the wound is by no means a dangerous one, though it bled freely. If inflammation does not supervene, she will do well enough. All she requires is skillful nursing."

"She shall have it!"

"Oh! there's no doubt of that; the two girls are devoted to her. Your daughters, sir?"

"One of them—the light-haired one."

"Ah! I thought they were not enough alike to be sisters. She's a brave girl, though she did turn pale at the sight of the blood; but the other took it as cool as could be. She proved very handy to me."

"Kate is a good girl."

"Well, I can't do anything more now, but I will look in again in the morning."

The surgeon departed. The moment he was gone the policeman again made his appearance.

"I shall have to report this affair at the station," he said. "Have either of you gentlemen anything to say?"

"Yes; be kind enough to ask the captain to telegraph to head-quarters for Frank Ray, the detective; he knows the assassins and can probably put you on their track," replied Bartyne.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RAYMOND'S STORY.

FRANK RAY came to the house early the next morning. He was greatly surprised to hear what had taken place, and was very much excited over it.

They wondered over his agitation, but they were soon to know the cause of it.

"And so our friend Ossian was a woman?" he said.

"Doesn't it beat all?" answered Kate. "We never suspected her, not one of us."

This discussion took place in the parlor, and assembled there were Genni Bartyne, Etta, Kate, Chester Starke and Frank Ray.

The surgeon had just departed from his morning's visit to Almira, and had reported her to be in a very favorable condition.

"This was a bold attempt on the part of the villains," said Ray, musingly. "They have left the city, and I have traced them beyond the Harlem River, but the clew is lost there. They have a hiding-place somewhere in Morrisania. They must have come from there last night. They have had spies watching this house, that's evident. You must be more careful, sir, and not give them another chance to fire a shot at you," he added, earnestly.

"I'll try not to," answered Bartyne.

"I shall have this house strictly watched every night while you remain here, though they will hardly venture here again, knowing that we will be on the watch for them."

"They may think they have succeeded in their murderous attempt."

"Not they; or, if they did, the newspapers would speedily apprise them to the contrary. I think, however, that I can capture them before they can trouble you again."

"Would this mask afford you any clew?"

Ray looked at the mask, and the mysterious marks inside of it.

"There's nothing to lead to any thing in that," he said. "Such a mask can be purchased at any of the toy-shops, and the marks are merely the private ones of the retailer denoting its cost price. It was worn, probably, by the assassin to produce alarm, as such a hideous face, dimly seen through the darkness, might do; and it also served the purpose of a disguise. These scoundrels are of a very ingenious turn of mind, their devices are numerous. But I'll trap them yet. This very night I expect to surprise them in their retreat in Westchester county. I have got two comrades to aid me—two of the smartest on the force, and they are following up the tracks now. I have promised them a handsome reward if we are successful, in your name, sir."

"Of course," returned Bartyne. "Do you want any money for present purposes?"

"Well, a few hundreds might prove useful. There's nothing like ready money for expediting matters in this world."

"How many hundreds?"

"Say five."

"Ride down to the office with me, and I'll give you a check for that amount."

The three, Bartyne, Chester Starke and Ray took their departure together, leaving the house in the charge of Kate and Etta. The two girls had no apprehension of a visit from the False Faces in the daytime.

The office was closed at three o'clock in the afternoon, and Bartyne and Chester were home again by four. Their dinner-hour was six. Kate attended to that meal, and astonished the colored servant by her culinary skill.

Etta took her book or sewing into Almira's room, to keep her company, for she had already formed a strong attachment to this strange woman; but Almira slept heavily nearly all that day. She would occasionally open her eyes, smile at the fair face, which appeared to her not unlike an angel's watching by her bedside, and then fall asleep again.

This long sleep proved very refreshing and strengthening to her.

When Genni Bartyne returned to the house he ascended once to Almira's room to inquire into her condition.

He found her lying with her eyes closed and Etta sitting, hemming a handkerchief, beside her.

"Is she asleep?" he asked.

"I think so," answered Etta. "She has been asleep the greater part of the day."

"So much the better; the sleep will do her good. Has the doctor been here again?"

"Yes, he called at noon."

"What did he say?"

"That she was doing well. He does not appear to have any doubt of her recovery now."

"Good! She's a wonderful woman, Etta; you'll say so when you know her as well as I do. In the darkest hour of my life she and her brother greatly befriended me. I can never sufficiently repay them for what they have done for me."

Almira opened her eyes.

"You have done so, Peter, over and above," she answered, feebly, but quite distinctly. "Ossian would never have been worth what he is now if we had not met you. He's satisfied and so am I."

Bartyne smiled.

"Not asleep, Almira?" he said.

"No; I was kind of dozing when you came in, and the sound of your voice awoke me."

"You have slept well?"

"Yes; and I feel much stronger. I know I'm going to live now; when I thought I was dying I—"

She paused abruptly, and a scarlet flush swept over her pale face.

"You were as brave as could be, Almira," rejoined Bartyne, pretending not to understand her allusion.

She looked at him with a wistful curiosity.

"I don't exactly remember what I said then," she replied, slowly, "Do you, Peter?"

"Really, I can't say; there was so much confusion about us," he answered, evasively.

He saw that she was in doubt whether she had betrayed the secret of her love for him or not.

She breathed a sigh of relief at his answer, for it made her think that she had not.

"The detective, Mr. Ray, has been here to-day, and he has every hope of capturing these assassins."

"He's a brave young man," replied Almira, and she smiled in a manner that perplexed Bartyne.

"I think so, too," he responded.

"So much like his father!"

Bartyne stared at this.

"His father!" he exclaimed. "Do you know his father?"

"Oh, yes, very well."

"That's odd! You never said anything about it before! Where did you ever meet his father?"

"Down in Pennsylvania."

"In Pennsylvania! When?"

"It's going on nigh to thirteen years now. And this young man looks something as his father looked then; only I don't think the young man is as good-looking as his father was at his age; but then the boy has led a rough kind of life, and that may have spoiled his beauty a little."

"He looks very much like father here," Etta said, joining in the conversation. "I thought so the first time I ever saw him."

"Like me?" ejaculated Bartyne, surprisedly.

"Yes."

"And did you think he looked anything like your brother Raymond?" asked Almira.

"Raymond—my boy!" exclaimed Bartyne, tremulously. "Ah, heavens! Almira, you do not mean it?—nothing escapes your penetration—this young man?"

"Is your son?"

"Can it be possible?"

"You'll find it so, Peter."

"But does he know it?"

"He does; he admitted as much to me."

"My brother Raymond!" cried Etta; "but I could not recollect his face, though it seemed very familiar to me; but then I was so young when he ran away from aunt Margaret's house."

"But why has he not revealed himself to me?" asked Bartyne. "If he knows me, why is he silent?"

"That's what I asked him that day—you remember?"

"And what did he say?"

"He wanted to capture your enemies first. He is resolved to free you from their persecutions."

"I know he is. Ah! he's a true son of mine!"

"He is that, Peter. You've reason to be proud of two such children as you have got."

"I am, Almira—I am! And most thankful to Heaven that has so strangely preserved them to me!"

"Etta left her father conversing with Almira and went down-stairs in search of Kate. She found her standing in front of the kitchen range, with a ladle in her hand, attending to a kettle of soup, while the colored woman looked on in admiration.

"Oh, Kate, only to think of it!" exclaimed Etta, with more vivacity than she generally displayed.

Kate turned sharply around, crying:

"Eh? What's broke now?"

"Mr. Ray, the detective—"

"What of him?" interrupted Kate, with great interest.

"He's my brother!"

"Your brother?"

"Yes, my long lost brother!"

"Your lost long brother!" repeated Kate, confusedly; and the ladle dropped from her fingers and clashed upon the floor.

"What do you think of that?"

Kate looked bewildered.

"I don't know what to think!" she responded, gaspingly. "Oh, my! but is it true?"

"Almira says so; she knew him the moment she saw him."

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The villains were then traced back to the city, and across the North River into Jersey, and in that direction Ray and his companions had followed them.

This was all the information that Genni Bartyne could obtain in that quarter. The next he received was in a telegram from Ray sent from Newcastle, Delaware.

It contained these cheering words:

"The villains are secured and caged in the jail here. Look for me. I start for New York to-day."

Ray arrived at the house that evening, and received a welcome that surprised him.

Kate admitted him, shook hands with him vigorously, crying:

"Lord, I'm so glad to see you, and so will they all be!" and conducted him into the parlor, where Genni Bartyne, Chester Starke and Etta were assembled, exclaiming: "Here's Mr. Ray!"

Genni Bartyne sprung excitedly to his feet as Ray entered the room.

"Welcome, my boy!" he cried.

He grasped Ray by the hand and gazed earnestly in his face.

"Yes, yes, Almira was right!" he continued. "You are my son! Raymond, my boy, come to your father's heart!" and he pressed the astonished young man to his breast in a strong and loving embrace.

"There's no denying it!" exclaimed Ray, laughingly, when he recovered from his surprise, and the vigorous hug his father had given him. "But how did you find it out?"

"Almira told me!"

"Ah, yes! but how she could have guessed it puzzles me. How is she, by the way?"

"Improving rapidly. She will soon be well again."

"I am delighted to hear it. She is too valuable a woman to be lost to the world."

"My brother!" cried Etta; and she embraced him.

Kate was very fidgety, and Ray observed it.

"Don't you intend to embrace me, too?" he inquired, roguishly.

"Yes, I will!" answered Kate, very red in the face.

"Of course, you're one of the family," he rejoined, and gave her a hug that nearly squeezed the breath out of her body."

"Oh!" gasped Kate; and she added, significantly, when he released her: "If I'm not one of the family, I'm sure I ought to be."

Ray laughed and shook hands with Chester Starke cordially.

"And here's another member of the family, or will be," he said, with a sly glance at Etta, which caused her to blush in a very pretty and becoming manner.

Then they all laughed merrily together, as if the coming of this young man had put them in the best of spirits—as indeed it had.

"Sit down, my boy, sit down," said Genni Bartyne. "I have a world of questions to ask you."

"The villains are in limbo—you got my telegram?" rejoined Ray, seating himself beside his father.

"Yes, yes, but never mind them now. I want to ask you about yourself. Why did you come among us as a stranger, and not make yourself known?"

"Well, I wanted to work the case up for you first, and then I had a curiosity to see if you would discover me—you or Etta, there?"

"I don't think I ever should," Bartyne admitted.

"Nor I," said Etta. "How could I remember you with all that hair upon your face. You did not have any beard when we lived with aunt Margaret."

Ray laughed at this.

"I should say not at that age," he answered. "That was a long time ago."

"You ran away from her—why?" questioned Bartyne.

"Because she would not tell me my father's name—she said that he had disgraced it, and that I should never be known by it. I didn't believe her. From what little I remembered of my father, I believed him to be a good man."

"My boy! But she was not altogether wrong. She believed she spoke the truth. It is a sad story; you and Etta shall hear it—but not now, not now—some other time."

"Chester Starke has told me enough to make me understand the rest; but, as you say, father, we will not speak of that now; some other time will be more suitable. I know you want to hear what happened to me. Aunt Margaret and I could not get along together. She made me think that both my parents were dead; or rather, I should say, she tried to make me think so, but she never succeeded. I thought my father was alive and so I started off to find him."

"A strange idea!"

"Yes; and it led to strange results. I wandered down to one of the piers on the lake, with a vague idea that I must go on a steamboat. Just then one came puffing up to the pier to land its passengers, while others were waiting to go aboard. When the passengers went aboard, I went with them. When the boat got out into the lake, they discovered that they had a passenger who could not pay his fare. I remember how frightened I was when they began to question me."

Ray paused to laugh over the recollection.

"But they could not go back to put me off, and when the captain found, from my story, that I was an orphan who had made a bold push in the world seeking his fortune, he sent me to the steward with directions to have me wait upon the table at meals. So you see I commenced my career in a very humble capacity. One thing had bothered me—I was puzzled what to call myself."

"You did not know your name?"

"Only part of it. I knew my first name was Raymond, and that I had been called Ward in Erie because that was aunt Margaret's name; but I was determined not to bear her name; I disliked her too much for that, so I said my name was Ray, and nothing else; but I soon found that did not satisfy my questioners, and that I must have another name. I thought of the place we had lived in before we went to Erie—Franklin; that struck me as a good name and I took it. I began with Ray Franklin, but it was soon reversed to Franklin Ray; and that name I retained through all my adventurous career. The steamboat carried me to Buffalo, and by that time I had enough of the waiter business. I went ashore, and I never went back. By some chance I made the acquaintance of a boy, before I had been in Buffalo

an hour, whose father was captain of a canal-boat. This boy drove the horses. I said I thought that would be good fun, and he offered to get me a chance at it. He took me to the canal basin, and I was engaged. In this occupation, I worked my way to Albany; and there another chance gave me a berth on board a lumber sloop bound down the river. That brought me to New York."

"You seem to have gone straight ahead," remarked Bartyne, with a smile.

"I did; and I continued to go by water, for in New York I shipped as cabin-boy on board a vessel bound for South America. I made one voyage after another—I will not weary you with the details—until I became tired of this roving life, and finally abandoned the sea. I had a motive for this. In all my career I had been prudent, until I had accumulated quite a large sum of money. I banked it here in New York on my return from each voyage. I wished to take my sister under my own care, and satisfy myself if my father was really dead. I went to Erie in quest of Etta, and discovered that aunt Margaret was dead, and Etta gone away. I could not find anybody who could give me the least idea of where she was or in what direction she had gone. Every effort that I made to find her proved fruitless. I returned to New York."

"But why did you not go to the wells beyond Franklin?" questioned Bartyne. "You would have found me there."

"I did go to Franklin, but the only name I could inquire about was Ward. They did not know it there—there was no one who remembered her, or the two children."

"True, true; her right name was Aylward."

"Aylward?" exclaimed Ray, surprisedly.

"Yes; the strange perversity which led her to change her name and keep mine from you has kept us asunder all these years. But let us judge her leniently, for she is dead!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHIPPING-POST AND PRISON.

"WHEN Chester here came to me seeking my services in your case, (for I had adopted the profession of detective as one affording the excitement congenial to my mind,) and stated the facts, I knew that I had found what I had been so long seeking," continued Ray.

"And yet you excited no suspicion in my mind that you were concerned in the facts I so related," said Chester.

Ray smiled.

"Of course not, my boy. I did not wish to say anything until I had thoroughly satisfied myself," he replied. "When you took me to the office and introduced me to Mr. Peter Shaw, I felt that I was right in my surmise; but I still concluded to hold my peace until I had worked out the case to a happy termination. Our female friend—what do you call her?"

"Almira Plummer."

"She bothered me a little by guessing who I was. I had no idea that she was a woman then. I thought she was a strange sort of a man, but the knowledge of her true sex explains all the strangeness away. I can understand her action now. She urged me to reveal myself to you, but I was still resolved to catch this Edgar Skelmersdale and his gang first."

"You have succeeded?"

"Yes; after their attempt at assassination here they abandoned this section, and crossed over to Jersey. Vengeance was their object here; plunder was their object where they went. They did not know that I was on their track. They still kept ahead of me, but I tracked them to Wilmington, Delaware."

"So far! What could have taken them there?"

"A robbery, which they planned with all the shrewdness and cunning which characterize their organization. Masked in their false faces, they burst suddenly into the cashier's house, surprising him in the midst of his family. Their intention was to handcuff him, and demand the keys of the bank-vaults."

"A daring scheme!"

"But not successfully worked out. At the time the False Faces entered the room there were more parties present than they had anticipated, and the game they were attempting to play became consequently all the more perplexing. Consternation followed the appearance of the robbers in those strange faces, which, while bearing a human semblance, were as impassive as the face of a corpse. The women screamed, and one fainted dead upon the floor. The cashier was handcuffed, though he made a gallant resistance. The cries of the women, their wild efforts to escape, the struggles of the cashier in his manly endeavors to free himself, raised an alarm, and the robbers were obliged to retreat without obtaining the keys of the bank-vaults. I and my friends arrived in the town the next morning. We heard the story and knew that they were the party we were in search of. We joined in the pursuit and, I make no boast in saying it, by our aid and advice the whole party were captured."

"How many were there?"

"There were seven in all when we came up with them, but we only carried five into Newcastle."

"What became of the other two?"

"We left them dead in the wood where we overtook them. Though surprised, they made a desperate resistance, and two were killed in the struggle to overpower them."

"Was Edgar Skelmersdale killed?" inquired Bartyne, quickly.

"No; we took him and the lawyer, Selkreg, and Doctor Waterlyet alive, and they are now in Newcastle jail awaiting their trial."

"Then a just punishment will be awarded to them."

"Undoubtedly. Were they here in New York they might find some loophole of escape, but there it is impossible. Justice must be dealt out to them there to the full penalty of the law. You can now rest in peace."

"I hope so; but, Raymond, I have a strong desire to be present at the trial and hear the sentence."

"Very good, sir. I shall have to attend to give some evidence, and you can go with me."

Raymond Bartyne, to give him his true name, took up his quarters at the house in Eightieth street after that night.

At his father's request he gave up his profession

of detective, and took an interest in his business at the office.

Genni Bartyne's idea was to leave the New York officers in the charge of Raymond and Chester and return himself to the Bartyne wells.

He had several objects in view, all depending upon Almira's recovery. As soon as she was able to travel, he intended to take her, Etta, Kate and Raymond to the wells, and then make definite arrangements for the future.

He had surprises in store for all of them, and he smiled in anticipation as he reflected over them.

In the mean while he should have the opportunity to witness the trial of the False Faces.

It was not from any spirit of revenge that Genni Bartyne wished to hear the final doom pronounced upon the man who had so deeply wronged him, but to feel satisfied that his power of injury was destroyed or rendered nugatory.

Being apprised of the day appointed for the trial, Genni Bartyne and Raymond went to Newcastle, the county-town of the county of the same name; therefore the trial was held there, the city where the crime was committed being in the same county.

The trial was held on the nineteenth of November and lasted until the fifth day of December.

The prisoners were all convicted and sentenced, first to receive forty lashes at the whipping-post, and then to be imprisoned for ten years.

The whipping-post is an old-time mode of punishment, peculiar alone to the State of Delaware. In no other State in the Union, that I am aware of, is this method of punishment retained.

Edgar Skelmersdale's cheek paled as he listened to his sentence. The term of imprisonment he did not heed, though it would take the ten best years of his life from him; but the moral degradation of a public whipping was the keenest torture that could be inflicted upon his proud spirit.

The presence of Genni Bartyne and his son, at that hour, added to the bitter sense of gall and humiliation that he felt.

He knew that Bartyne had found his son, for, when Raymond testified, he said:

"My name is Raymond Bartyne, but I have been known, in the force only by the name of Frank Ray."

And Raymond knew that Skelmersdale had slain his mother, for the story of the tragedy at French Creek had been related to him by his father, and he exulted over the sentence pronounced upon her murderer.

"Had I known what I know now," he told his father, "there would have been three dead bodies left in the wood instead of two, and the third would have been that of Edgar Skelmersdale!"

Raymond persuaded his father to remain and witness the whipping to be inflicted upon Edgar.

They formed part of the throng around the whipping-post. The forty lashes were duly inflicted, and then the culprits were placed in the pillory for one hour, there to endure the gibes and mockery of the rabble of half-grown boys and idle men.

When the hour expired they were taken to the jail.

Genni Bartyne and Raymond returned to New York. Preparations were at once commenced for the visit to the oil wells, Almira being now nearly recovered from her wound.

The party, consisting of Bartyne, Almira, Etta, Kate and Raymond, took their departure, Chester going with them to the ferry, and exchanging a tender farewell with Etta.

Kate was very jubilant, as Raymond devoted himself to her and Etta, and she felt confident that he liked her. As for herself, she was deep in love with him as she could be; and her love made her black eyes sparkle with an unusual brilliancy.

They were all very happy. There had been storms in the past for all of them, but the clouds appeared to have passed away, and the sun of happiness shone radiantly forth.

This sunny calm was deceptive. The False Faces were not done with them yet. They were to be permitted to strike another blow of vengeful hatred.

Grave suspicions were entertained by many of the inhabitants of Newcastle that the little county jail could not long contain these desperate men.

The inferences that led to this conviction were the facts that those within the walls were only a few of a formidable band living without, and that the prison itself was not the structure that it should be, and several of the robbers in the cells were well-known jail-breakers.

In a short time, however, the sensation of the attempted bank robbery, the long trial, and the whipping-post, gradually wore away. The affair ceased to become common conversation, while the submissive and gentle conduct of the prisoners gradually destroyed the suspicion and led the people to feel that the jail was strong and the culprits baffled.

Edgar Skelmersdale, despite his vicious nature, had one firm, fast friend, who had clung faithfully to him through all these changing years.

That friend was a woman—a woman whose yellowish complexion, curly black hair, and blue-black eyes, made people in the North think she was a foreigner; yet she was native born. In the South they know this class of females well; they call them quadroons; one-fourth black.

In Texas, when he fled with the blood of Jane Bartyne upon his hands, he first had met her, a girl then, and found shelter in her father's cabin. After her father's death she had followed him, dressed in male attire, a faithful servitor.

She was the spy of the False Faces, appearing as occasion required either in male or female attire.

She had been called Eldora, a fanciful name given by her mother.

Her father was a "poor white," as they are called whose name was Boyd.

This woman was known in the band as Dora Boyd. She was tall for a woman, well-formed, and had a handsome, though somewhat fierce face.

When dressed as a man she would be readily taken for a Cuban or a Spaniard, or Italian; but it was as a woman, modestly and plainly attired, that she made her appearance in Newcastle.

She inquired for a family named Jefferson, the members of which were very rich and respectable. After she had been informed where the Jefferson family resided, her informant noticed that she did not go directly in the way pointed out, but

She left Newcastle, and returned again.

This time she inquired for the residence of another well-known family, named Carew, but as before it was observed that she did not go to the quarter of the town where the Carews resided.

This fair mysterious woman eventually took up her lodgings in a little cabin in the outskirts of the village inhabited by negroes.

No suspicion was excited by her movements, no one seemed to think that she had any particular mission in Newcastle.

A short time after she sought shelter in this secluded cabin, a negress came to the jail and asked permission to see a prisoner. She was allowed to enter.

She saw the prisoner she had asked for, and she also saw Edgar Skelmersdale, and placed in his hands a letter from Dora Boyd, telling him to be of good heart and not to despond, because she was working steadily for his and his companion's freedom and release.

Dora Boyd did not reside all the time in the negro's cabin, but traveled between Philadelphia and Newcastle frequently.

Many letters were transmitted to Edgar Skelmersdale by the hands of the negress. Their contents consisted of warm assurances of help, of sincere wishes, and told him to have courage and hope.

The hour of deliverance drew near.

One afternoon a small steam-tug came up the Delaware and cast anchor at a convenient point near the jail, just off the opposite bank.

In the mean time the mysterious woman had disappeared, and there seemed to be no relation between her visits and the presence of the tug.

Evening closed upon the river, the tug and the prison, and in the darkness all things grew indistinct.

Nothing disturbed the order of the prison or the repose of the town until one o'clock in the morning.

There was no guard about the jail except the night warden. Shortly after the clock struck one he heard a knock in the back yard upon the door which connected the latter with the prison proper.

Not suspecting anything wrong he opened the door and looked out.

The instant he did so he was fiercely grasped. He saw the muffled figures of what he supposed to be four men; he heard low mutterings and hurried whispers, and the instant after, without the opportunity to raise a cry, he was hurled to the ground, a strong hand clutched his throat, a glittering dagger flashed before his eyes, and then its keen point was held against his breast, over his heart.

"One cry, one whisper, one breath louder than we alone can hear, and you are a dead man!"

It appeared to him that these words came from a woman's throat, but the threat was none the less portentous.

The next moment he was gagged, handcuffed and leg-ironed. The prison keys were taken from him. Two men guarded him, knife in hand, while the other two with the keys went to the cells of the False Faces and released them. They visited no other cells in all the prison save these.

Edgar Skelmersdale clasps the disguised woman in his arms, when he comes from his cell, for he is the first to be liberated.

"My brave Dora! well done!" he cries.

And she feels rewarded for what she has done.

Then the others are released one by one. All are earnest in their praises of the courageous woman who has brought their comrades to the rescue.

They assemble in the corridor of the prison and hurriedly whisper among themselves.

No one has detected them thus far, and no one knows of their freedom, save the night warden, lying out in the yard, gagged, handcuffed and leg-ironed.

They pass out to the place where he lies.

They fear that he may be found, or that he may free himself before they are far enough away, and they excitedly debate what they shall do with him.

"Dead men tell no tales," whispers one, and, without pausing for answer, he bends upon his knee, and raises his knife to strike.

Dora catches his arm, stays the descending blow, and pulls him away from the prostrate man.

"Never shed blood when it can be avoided. Besides, it is a cowardly act to strike one so helpless," she cries, upbraidingly.

"She is right," said Skelmersdale.

That settles it; the warden's life is saved.

"We must put him out of sight somewhere!"

This suggestion comes from Cebra Selkreg, and they all agree with it.

But where? They are at a loss.

"Carry him to the cells," prompts Doctor Watervliet.

They take up the helpless warden in their arms. They descend the stone steps leading cellarward, and place their burden on the floor.

There is a large heap of coal lying near, and that suggests another idea to Cebra Selkreg. He gives utterance to it, and they approve and adopt it.

They roll the warden over upon his face and pile a mass of coals upon his back and shoulders. The position of the poor man is thus rendered utter and absolutely hopeless.

Thus they leave him.

There is no suspicion of discovery above, and so they pass up the steps to the corridor that leads to the yard, and scaling the wall by means of a ladder, which a workman employed upon the building had left there, are free.

The wind roars through the trees as they leave the prison behind them, a violent snow-storm is raging, and down on the river rides the little steam-tug, which, being nothing unusual, does not excite suspicion.

They reach the river's bank, the tug steams up, they board her, and the tug departs, her smoke-stack disappearing amidst the snow-flakes that fall thickly over the river.

The warden does not report in the morning according to rule.

The sheriff enters the jail to learn the cause of this remissness.

He finds the cells empty, the robbers gone—a pair of ladders only giving the clew to their escape.

When the warden is discovered in the cellar he is unconscious; and when the gag is taken from his mouth it is found that his jaws are set and cannot be closed.

In a brief space longer death must have ensued. He recovers, however, sufficiently in a few hours' time to tell what he knows. But he cannot tell in which direction the robbers have gone.

The news of the escape is sent far and wide, and liberal rewards, including a special sum of one thousand dollars, are offered for their capture.

So Edgar Skelmersdale and his False Faces are once again at liberty to enact more desperate crimes.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LAST EXPLOIT.

THE family at the Bartyne wells read the story of the escape in the newspapers. It was graphically described by a reporter, and the "Mysterious Female" entered largely into the account.

They were all surprised at it, and Raymond Bartyne was not only surprised but vexed.

"I'll never check a good impulse again!" he cried.

"What good impulse have you checked, Raymond?" inquired his father.

"When we captured Edgar Skelmersdale I was sorely tempted to put a bullet through him. I'm sorry I did not do so now."

"Such thoughts are sinful!" said Almira, reprovingly.

"P'raps they are," responded Ossian; "but they are nat'ral for all that. When I was a boy I never saw a pesky snake that I didn't want to put my heel onto his head and smash him. And if ever there was a pesky snake this Edgar Skelmersdale is one."

"I think I should shoot him if I had a good chance!" cried Kate.

"He certainly is a very bad man!" said Etta.

Almira found herself in a decided minority. The feeling against the villain who had wrought so much woe to them was very bitter in the Bartyne family; and Kate Vehslage shared in it, for she considered herself one of the family, as Raymond's attentions to her evidently "meant something"—as she phrased it—and her heart beat delightedly over the definition that she found for that "something."

"I shall start right away for New York," Raymond continued.

This announcement surprised them.

"Why?" was demanded.

"I intend to place Edgar Skelmersdale again in captivity," he answered. "I shall never feel contented until I have done so. I might as well earn that thousand dollars as any other man."

"Let him go," rejoined Genni Bartyne. "Justice is sure at last to overtake him. He will not trouble us again, I think."

Raymond shook his head doubtfully.

"I'm not so sure of that," he replied. "His fortunes are now at a desperate strait, or he and his confederates would not have made that bold and unsuccessful attempt upon the National bank at Wilmington. There is no telling what they may do next."

"I do not think they will dare to venture here," returned his father. "There are fifty workmen within call of us."

"It would be pretty risky business if they did come here," said Ossian. "The men here read the papers, and they know how near 'Miry came to getting killed, and if they were to find any of the scamps prowling round here they'd make it pretty lively for them. I guess there wouldn't be any need of a judge and jury after they got through with them."

"You are right, Ossian," rejoined Raymond; "the villains will hardly dare to venture here. I think they have returned to their old haunts in New York, and I want to have a hand in their recapture."

Raymond was not to be dissuaded from his purpose, and that afternoon he took his departure for New York.

Kate worried a good deal over his going, though he left a parting kiss upon her lips; but the remembrance of that was only an aggravation.

"Oh! if he should be killed?" she told herself, debatingly. "Officers do get killed sometimes. Oh! wouldn't it be dreadful to be made a widow before we're married?"

Edta endeavored to console Kate, but she had got the idea that something was going to happen to Raymond, and she could not be persuaded out of it. Like a great many people in this world, she borrowed misery to torment herself, and she did so successfully.

A week passed away, and they did not receive any tidings from Raymond.

"No news is good news," said Genni Bartyne, borrowing the proverb from the French.

They were now in the month of January. There had been several snow-storms until quite a quantity of snow had accumulated, and the weather had been severely cold; but now came a sudden change—the thaw which always comes in January.

It brought warm, sunny days, when the air was genial and balmy with the breath of spring. Little rivulets trickled from every hillside and went dancing in the sunbeams to add their water to the swollen and turbid creek.

The roads were miry, and traveling became irksome. The nights were dark and misty.

One of these nights, when the family were all assembled in the common sitting-room, before a fire of bituminous coal, which burned brightly in the grate, engaged in various occupations, a band of masked men burst suddenly in upon them.

Kate, sitting by the table, was the first to perceive them, and she slipped from her chair, and crawled quickly under the table. In the confusion that followed, this movement upon her part was not detected by the intruders; for on their first entrance Etta had screamed, Almira had uttered an exclamation of surprise, and Genni Bartyne and Ossian Plummer had started to their feet.

A desperate struggle ensued, but there were nine masked men, and the result could not be doubtful.

Bartyne and Plummer were overpowered, gagged and bound, and each placed in a chair. Almira and Etta were served in the same manner.

When this was accomplished, the leader of the masked men removed his mask, disclosing the features of Edgar Skelmersdale.

He confronted Genni Bartyne with malignant triumph.

"Again I have you in my power!" he cried; "and this time you shall not escape me. Listen to the

terms I propose: Here is the deed of sale which was offered to you before. Produce it, Nightshade."

The little lawyer stepped nimbly forward with the document in his hand, but he did not unmask his face.

"Sign it, or both you and your daughter shall die!" continued Edgar Skelmersdale. "Nod your head affirmatively, and your bonds shall be removed."

But Genni Bartyne did not nod his head affirmatively; he only stared at the robber with a fixed look of firm determination.

"You are obstinate? Then we will kill you all and rifle the house!" cried Skelmersdale, fiercely.

Genni Bartyne smiled defiantly. He knew that he could not expect any mercy on any terms, that the villains had come there to rob and murder.

"Henbane, Aconite, Creosote, Arsenic, advance!" continued Edgar.

Four of the masks approached the chairs of the captives, each selecting a particular one in the order in which they were called.

"Prepare!"

Four bowie knives were unsheathed, and flashed before the captives' eyes.

Kate, peeping from under the table, saw that the way was clear to the open door; she crawled out and darted for it.

Her sudden appearance startled Edgar, and checked his murderous purpose for the time.

"Ha! pursue her!" he cried.

"Leave her to me!" answered the voice of Dora Boyd, coming from what appeared to be a man's figure, with a black mask over his face.

Kate flew into the entry, but she did not run out at the front door, as Dora had expected, but darted swiftly up the stairs leading to the story above.

Dora hesitated for a moment, bewildered by this movement, and then followed her, with a gleaming knife in her hand.

No mercy now for Kate if she was overtaken; the fierce quadron would stab her to the heart remorselessly.

But Kate had her wits about her. She knew that Genni Bartyne's revolver was lying in the little box beneath the looking-glass upon the bureau, and that it was loaded and capped, for she had looked at it curiously that very day when she had tidied up his room and built a fire in the grate.

That fire was still burning, its flickering flame, from the oily, soft coal, showing through the open door.

She also knew that from the windows of this room she could summon the workmen of the wells to their assistance.

Her first thought was to secure the revolver, and stand in the doorway confronting her pursuer. She was not ignorant of the use of the pistol. Raymond Bartyne had instructed her, and allowed her to shoot at birds with his revolver as they strolled together on the banks of the creek.

The knowledge thus acquired served her well now.

As Dora gained the landing Kate fired at her point-blank; Dora uttered a piercing cry, fell backward, and plunged headlong down the stairs.

Then Kate rushed to one of the windows, threw up, thrust out her head, and shouted at the top of her lungs:

"Murder! help! Murder, help, help!"

Then she hastened back to the landing to dispute the ascent of any others of the band.

The sound of the pistol, Dora's fall, and the shrill, warning cry of Kate, caused the robbers to flock tumultuously into the hall.

Edgar Skelmersdale raised the form of Dora in his arms.

"Dead!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Oh, vengeance! Kill her! Kill them all!"

He drew his revolver and sprung up the stairs, but Kate, shrouded in the gloom above, reached over the baluster and fired at him, but the bullet intended for him went through Cebra Selkreg's right arm, as he was following Skelmersdale, pistol in hand, and the sudden pain caused him to press the trigger of his pistol, and it was discharged with deadly effect, in Skelmersdale's back; he had fired once at Kate, and was about to fire again, when the pang of this wound wheeled him around, and his revolver sent its deadly messenger among his own men.

A yell of agony followed it, and the masked man called Aconite fell dead, and at the same moment Edgar Skelmersdale dropped a corpse beside the faithful Dora.

Kate kept up a fusilade upon the throng at the foot of the stairs until she had emptied every chamber of the revolver.

The False Faces, however, did not wait to receive the last shot. Cebra Selkreg gave the word to retreat and they fled through the front door just in time to avoid the workmen, who, alarmed by Kate's cries, were hurrying to the spot.

The little lawyer was nearly distracted as he hurried through the gloom with his companions. His wound pained him keenly, and the death of Edgar Skelmersdale unnerved him.

He was obliged to lean on the doctor's arm as they hurried down the muddy road, fearful of pursuit.

"O-h! of all the awkward jobs!" he groaned.

"And all that girl's doing! How did she get under the table? Did

The Masked Band.

word of consolation to him in his plight. "Stick to me, doctor," he added, pleadingly.

"I will. Let us turn into the wood here, and then I will bind up your wound. I think the bullet must have cut an artery, or it would not bleed so freely."

"Oh! I'm cut out for a coffin, I think. This is the end of the False Faces!"

"It looks like it!"

The doctor led Selkreg into the wood, and placed him at the foot of a tree. He had a pocket-case of instruments and a dark lantern with him, which he invariably carried upon all expeditions.

He took out the lantern and lit it, and then he opened his case.

"Let's see the wound," he said, "Ah, yes; an artery severed, as I thought."

"How the blood spurts!" stammered Selkreg, who was very pale.

"Yes; that's the action of the heart. It's just like a force-pump, sending blood through the veins. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Oh, beautiful be— You doctors haven't any more feeling than a rhinoceros! Is it fatal? Am I going to die?"

Selkreg's teeth chattered together as he put this question.

"I guess not," answered the doctor. "I'll knot the ends of the artery, and you'll do; but it will give you a severe twinge."

"Go it—anything's better than dying. Ough! Augh! Is it done?"

"Yes, you'll do now," answered the doctor, bandaging the wound. "You appear to be very much afraid of death."

"No, not afraid; only I dislike to go in a hurry to any place where I'm not acquainted."

Now that he felt himself out of danger Selkreg's spirits began to revive.

"Do you feel well enough to go on?" inquired the doctor.

"I must feel well enough," answered Selkreg, as he struggled up to his feet; "for if we do not get away from this neighborhood before morning we shall be captured sure."

"Come on then."

They proceeded on their way.

Leaving them, let us return to the house which they quitted with so much precipitation.

Kate maintained her post at the head of the stairs, for she could not believe that she had put the robbers to flight by her unaided efforts, until she heard the voices of the workmen as they entered the house.

Recognizing them as familiar, she descended, and gazed curiously upon the three bodies lying in the hall.

"Oh! did I kill them all?" she exclaimed, amazedly.

"It would seem so, Kate," said Genni Bartyne, who, having been unbound, now appeared in the door of the sitting-room. "Come here!"

Kate followed him into the room, where the men were freeing the others from their disagreeable bonds.

"My men," continued Genni Bartyne, "here is the brave girl that saved us all!"

The workmen gave Kate quite a cheer.

"Yes, and she's killed three of 'em!" cried one of the workmen. "She's a stunner!"

"Three! And he—" Bartyne paused and looked at Kate inquiringly.

"I don't know," she answered. "I couldn't look at them. I may have been very brave then, but I'm all of a tremble now."

Kate dropped the pistol, and sunk into a chair. Etta came to her, put her arms around her neck and kissed her tenderly.

"You are just as brave as you can be," she said. "Raymond will be very proud of you for this."

"Will he?" rejoined Kate, delightedly.

Bartyne stepped into the hall and saw the upturned face of Edgar Skelmersdale, pale and rigid.

"At last!" he said. "Beneath this very roof he struck the murderous blow that robbed me of my heart's treasure, and blighted all my life—and here he has met his doom. This is Heaven's own retribution!"

Raymond Bartyne heard of this last exploit of the False Faces in Meadville, having traced them so far, but never supposing that they meditated a blow against his father. He thought their design was to rob a bank in one of the small cities of the oil region.

By his exertions every surviving member of the band was captured; and they were consigned to a stronger prison than the one from which they had escaped to work out their sentences.

Having accomplished this Raymond returned to the Bartyne wells, and there he received a full account of Kate's share in the events of that night of peril.

"We owe a great deal to that girl," said Genni Bartyne.

"I think I can contrive to pay her," answered Raymond.

Father and son looked at each other and smiled.

"I have no objection," remarked Bartyne.

"I thought you wouldn't have."

Shortly after this Raymond found Kate alone.

"You are just the kind of young woman I have been looking for," he cried.

Kate's heart began to beat violently. She knew what was coming, but pretended not to; yet her answer was a very encouraging one.

"Well, I've been willing to be found," she said.

"Father says you ought to be paid for what you've done."

"Your father is just the best man that ever lived!"

"And how's his son?"

"Oh! you'll do!"

"Do for you?"

"Yes," answered Kate, blushingly.

"You are too smart a female to be allowed to go out of this family, and so I have concluded that the best way—to keep you in it—would be for me to—"

Raymond had spoken this very slowly, and he now made a tantalizing pause.

"Well?" gasped Kate.

"To—marry you!"

"And will you?"

"If you will have me?"

"Oh! won't I?"

Kate's face was radiant now.

"And will you love me?" continued Raymond, roguishly.

"Love you?"

"Just a little?"

"Oh! ever so much!"

"Then you do love me a little already?"

"You know I do! My heart is brimful of love for you, and if I had sixteen hearts they'd all run over with it!"

"Then we'll consider it settled; and when Chester and Etta are married we will undergo the same ceremony."

"That will be delightful!"

"Then we'll seal the bond."

And the seal was lip to lip, and firmly stamped.

Etta surprised them during this performance.

"Heyday! you two appear to have come to an understanding!" she exclaimed.

"Well, we just have," returned Kate, nothing abashed.

"Etta, allow me to present you with the future Mrs. Raymond Bartyne," said Raymond.

"You could not have given me a better sister!" cried Etta; and she embraced Kate affectionately.

Genni Bartyne found an opportunity for a little private conversation with Almira Plummer.

"Almira, our young people are going to mate," he said. "There's Etta and Chester, and Kate and Raymond. When they are married they will reside in New York, coming down here occasionally to visit us. You and I, and Ossian, will live here; but I have been thinking that you and I, Almira, may as well get married first, just to set the young people a good example."

"Peter!" she murmured, and turned very pale.

"Genni," he corrected her. "Genni Bartyne. I have come back to my true name forevermore."

"You will always be Peter to me."

"Because under that name you learned to love me?"

She was silent, but strong emotion shook her frame.

"Almira, I know the secret of your heart. You have devoted your life to me—you have not hesitated to thrust yourself between me and death. There is only one way in which I can reward your long and faithful service: let me devote the remainder of my life to you."

Still she was silent.

"Shall it be so?" he urged.

Almira was but a woman after all.

"Yes," she murmured, faintly.

And so she took her reward.

THE END.

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